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EDITORIAL

Lukashenka Tries to Break EU-US Ties

"The United States of America, the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland reaffirm their commitment to the Republic of Belarus, in accordance with the Principles of the CSCE Final Act, to refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by the Republic of Belarus of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus to secure advantages of any kind.

This is the 3rd paragraph of the memorandum that heads of state of the US, UK, Russia and Belarus signed on December 5, 1994, at the CSCE summit held in Budapest. The full text, containing six paragraphs, was first published in the Winter 1994 issue of the *Belarusian Review* and some parts of it were republished later. It is regrettable that the West has so far not invoked the memorandum to protest Russia's use of political, and more recently, economic coercion vis-à-vis Belarus.

After ten years of maneuvering, Russia realized that its successful absorption of Belarus by political means was not in sight and had to switch to economic blackmail. First, it stopped delivery of natural gas to Belarus and subsequently doubled the gas price. Next, Moscow forced Belarus to sell a 50 percent share of its Beltransgaz gas distribution network to Russia's Gazprom.

Lukashenka stated that he would not trade Belarus' sovereignty for Russia's gas and accused Russia of breaking the 1994 agreement that it had signed along with the United States and the United Kingdom, in which it committed itself to respect "the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of the Republic of Belarus."

Looking for help in standing up to Russia, Lukashenka had turned to the European Union, but here he also ran into some difficulties. The EU showed little interest in Belarus as long as Russian gas was reaching Europe without interruption. Lukashenka got the EU's attention only when — during his quarrel with Russia over a gas price hike — he briefly turned off the gas flow to Europe. The blatantly rigged presidential election in March 2006 was another event that stirred up the EU.

After Germany assumed the EU chairmanship in 2007, the EU made clear that it was interested and ready to engage in a constructive dialogue with Minsk, provided Belarus frees all of its political prisoners, including the former presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin, and eases up on harassing the opposition. This was a bitter pill for Lukashenka to swallow. So he mended fences with Russia and toned down his pro-EU rhetoric.

The EU, to show it meant business, reduced Belarus' benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and increased prices for visas — this in addition to the existing list banning certain Belarusian officials from visiting EU countries.

The US followed a similar pattern. When Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer visited Belarus in April 2007, he said that the US was prepared to respond positively provided the Belarusian government would take "minimum steps" toward democratic reforms. Those first steps, he said, should include releasing all political prisoners and allowing peaceful demonstrations to take place. **He stated that the United States was prepared to increase pressure if necessary.** Seeing no response, Washington decided in November 2007 to impose sanctions against Belnaftakhim, a state controlled oil company, freezing any assets it had under US jurisdiction.

While Lukashenka had been trying to rebuild ties with the West by gradually releasing political activists — but still holding Kazulin — Moscow suddenly decided to act. Just in the single month of December 2007, the Russian prime minister condemned US economic sanctions against Belarus; Putin paid a visit to Minsk; the Belarus' ambassador to the US, Mikhail Khvastou, accused the United States of violating the 1994 agreement by applying economic sanctions against his country; and Lukashenka threatened to expel the US ambassador, Karen Stewart, if the US were to strengthen its sanctions.

This year, February became another month of intense activity. Belarusian Foreign Minister Siarhei Martynau paid a two-day unofficial visit to Berlin where he discussed the steps leading to a dialogue between Belarus and the EU. On March 6, Putin telephoned Lukashenka. According to BelTA, they discussed the establishment of the "union state"; strengthening trade and economic relations; cooperation in humanitarian and joint security sectors; harmonizing actions in foreign policy; and "the present condition and perspective development of Belarus' relations with certain Western countries."

On March 7, two significant events took place. The Belarusian foreign ministry announced that Belarus was recalling its ambassador from Washington for "consultations" and "recommended" that the US follow suit. The other event, perhaps by coincidence, was reaching agreement to establish the European Commission's office in Minsk, concluded at the Commission's office in Brussels. Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the European Union's commissioner for external relations, expressed hope that the opening of the office in Minsk "will help create the conditions in which our relationship can grow and help the EU to reinforce its ties with the citizens of Belarus."

On March 10, Lukashenka met with a delegation of British members of parliament and business people in Minsk, where he declared that **"prospects for relations between Belarus and the EU will depend on whether the European Union's foreign policy is independent from that of the United States."**

On March 11, the Belarus' foreign ministry informed Karen Stewart that she should leave Minsk **within 24 hours.** She left March 12 for Vilnius and from there she went to Brussels, joining Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer for consultations with the EU. The consultations took place March 14, with the result that the EU and US agreed that no dialogue with Belarus should start until Kazulin is freed.

All the events that followed Putin's visit to Minsk last December and his follow up call to Lukashenka March 6 lead this writer to conclude that Moscow is firmly behind the current drive to separate the US from the EU. The probable aim is to block the installation of US missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic; and to undermine the US plan for rebuilding the Polish military, recently announced by President Bush; and, most fundamentally, to continue Moscow's push for restoration of its de facto hegemony in eastern Europe and big power status beyond.

Joe Arciuch,
Editor-at-Large

From the Publisher

In the past few months we have witnessed sudden surprising releases of a number of political prisoners in Belarus. This action by the regime was undoubtedly in response to the political pressure by the Western states, as well as to the economic sanctions instituted by the United States.

The one very visible political prisoner who was not freed is Alexander Kazulin, the former Presidential candidate. Having been freed for three days to attend his wife's funeral, he was returned to prison to serve the remaining three years of his sentence 'for malicious hooliganism'. And while others have been released, a new and growing group of politically accused is going through orchestrated court processes, based on patently trumped-up and absurd charges. The targeted group appears to be the youth, including university and high school students, and owners of small private businesses, who were previously quite apolitical.

The economic sanctions, and particularly the freeze on U.S. assets of the government owned and highly profitable oil refining concern Belnaftakhim, has impacted the regime severely. It responded first with threats, and later by withdrawing its Ambassador from Washington, and demanding the recall of the U.S. Ambassador from Minsk. This escalation of tension is taking place in advance of extensive plans by the democratically oriented population to celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the Declaration of Belarusian Independence. The organizers have called on the government of Belarus to take part in marking this historical occasion by at least allowing a peaceful march through the capital, laying flowers at the statues of major Belarusian writers. The nature of the official response to this and other festivities may determine whether the growing crisis will escalate during this anniversary year. On the other hand, it may become an opening for freedom, an opportunity that according to ancient Oriental wisdom, is contained within each crisis.

FEATURES

MEMORANDUM
By the Executive Council of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in Exile

The Executive Council of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR Rada) in Exile, acting in its constitutional capacity on the basis of the BNR Rada's historical mandate as a Representative Assembly and Government in Exile, in connection with the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of independence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic on 25th March 1918:

- recalls that the 1918 Belarusian Democratic Republic established a Belarusian national statehood based on principles that would make Belarus a full and equal member of the European community of nations, with a strong sense of political and civic democracy;
- recalls that when the BNR was overrun by the Red Army in 1919, this marked the start of a long period of struggle for the implementation of the BNR principles in Belarus;
- draws attention to the fact that this struggle has continued until the present day and still continues, since the Republic of Belarus has so far failed to transform itself into a full-scale Belarusian nation state according to the BNR principles;
- reiterates that the BNR Rada has therefore not found it possible at any time to implement its constitutional aim of transferring its historical mandate as a state authority to any government that has ruled in Belarus to-date. The BNR Rada therefore has been and still is obliged to continue in its constitutional capacity carrying out its mandate;
- appeals to the Governments of the European Union member states, of the United States of America, of Canada, and the EU institutions, to continue their assistance to the cause of democracy and independence of Belarus,

In particular, and in anticipation of, the celebrations to mark the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of the BNR independence on 25th March 1918, the Executive Council of the BNR Rada appeals for influence to be exerted on the government of Alexander Lukashenka to refrain from the repressions that would otherwise all too probably be inflicted on Belarusian citizens wishing to celebrate the 90th anniversary of BNR independence in Belarus

Congressional Record

Washington, Tuesday, January 15, 2008

House of Representatives

HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS OFF TO DISCOURAGING START IN THE NEW YEAR

HON. ALCEE L. HASTINGS
OF FLORIDA
Tuesday, January 15, 2008

Mr. HASTINGS of Florida

Madam Speaker, last month, I chaired a Helsinki Commission briefing with a delegation of leading political opposition figures and democratic activists from Belarus. The briefing was entitled, “The Future Belarus: Democracy or Dictatorship” and focused on the prospects for change in a country located in the heart of Europe that has Europe's worst track record with respect to human rights and democracy. Unfortunately, developments since the delegation's visit to Washington have been deeply discouraging and do not bode well for Belarus' democratic future.

One of the young people who testified at the briefing, 19-year-old Zmitser Khvedaruk, spoke eloquently of the dangers that young human rights activists face in Belarus. His words were prophetic, as a few days later, back in Belarus, he was beaten and knocked unconscious by riot policemen, then rushed by ambulance to the hospital. Just last week, the Minsk district prosecutor's office in Minsk refused to open an investigation into Zmitser's beating.

A day earlier, my friend Anatoly Liabedzka, one of Belarus' staunchest defenders of democratic rights, who also testified before the Commission, was roughed up by Belarusian police as well. It was far from the first time that this leader of the democratic opposition had been beaten up or repressed by the Lukashenka regime. On January 4, the Lukashenka regime banned Anatoly from travelling abroad in what was obviously a politically-motivated decision. Today, Anatoly is in jail serving a 15-day sentence, along with several dozen other pro-democracy and small business advocates who participated in a January 10 protest against restrictions on activities of small businesses. Some of the activists--mostly young people--received injuries during their arrest. Tatyana Tsishkevich, who was severely beaten during her arrest and presented her bloodstained jacket in court, received a 20-day sentence. Arsien Pakhomau, a freelance photo correspondent for *Nasha Niva* weekly--one of the very few remaining independent publications in Belarus--was also sentenced to 15 days' administrative arrest. On the day of the protest, a number of websites that cover social and economic affairs in Belarus, such as Charter '97 and Radio Liberty, were partially or fully blocked by the authorities.

These most recent repressive actions follow the sentencing of opposition activist Artur Finkevich to 18 months in prison; the arbitrary use of judicial power to put out of business independent newspapers such as *Novy Chas*; steps to liquidate theopposition Belarusian Communist Party; and the fining of Baptist pastor Yuri Kravchuk for unregistered religious activity. Belarus is the only country in Europe with compulsory registration before religious activity can take place.



HON. ALCEE L. HASTINGS

Unfortunately, the indications in just the first few weeks of this New Year are not encouraging. Lukashenka's presidential administration has recently rejected the opposition's proposal to hold talks on the upcoming 2008 parliamentary elections, refusing an offer by the Belarusian opposition to consider joint proposals on conducting parliamentary elections in accordance with democratic standards.

Madam Speaker, as Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission and as someone who has long been involved in the OSCE process to promote security, cooperation, democracy and human rights among the 56 OSCE countries, including Belarus, I am deeply disappointed in the Belarusian Government's continual flaunting of freely undertaken OSCE commitments. It is my strong hope that Mr. Lukashenka will cease the self-imposed isolation of his country —threatening, most recently, to expel U.S. Ambassador Karen Stewart —and will give serious thought to the offers of cooperation that have come from the United States and the European Union if Belarus releases political prisoners and displays respect for basic democratic norms. In the meantime, the Lukashenka regime can be assured that my colleagues and I on the Helsinki Commission are determined to stand by Anatoly Liabedzka, Zmitser Khvedaruk and all those in Belarus —young and old —bravely struggling for freedom, democracy and respect for human rights.

"Americans Saved My Life"

By Walter Stankievich

At a press conference in Minsk on February 28, 2008, the former Presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin thanked the American people and the U.S. government for saving his life in December of 2006. The long term political prisoner was released for three days to allow him to attend the funeral of his wife.

The press conference took place the day after the funeral of his wife, an event that was marked by a great outpouring of popular sympathy. About 2,000 people from all walks of life attended the memorial service for Kazulin's 48-year-old wife Iryna at the St. Simon and St. Alena Roman Catholic church, in the center of Minsk.

Just how was Kazulin's life saved back in 2006? The following paragraphs describe some of the steps:

Alexander Kazulin was sentenced to a lengthy prison term on trumped up political charges. To protest this miscarriage of justice, he started a hunger strike, vowing to continue until the issue of human rights abuses in Belarus is raised at the U.N. Security Council.

On November 27, 2007, the following note was sent to the appropriate governmental offices:

Please take steps to prevent a tragic death of Belarusian opposition leader Kazulin !

Alexander Kazulin is in the 39th day of his political hunger strike.

His situation is critical.

Last July he was sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for "disorderly conduct and malicious hooliganism," infractions that took place around the elections in March. This outrageous sentence was condemned by many governments around the world.

This is his most recent statement:

"I will continue the hunger strike; I shall carry on to the end, live or die. I am also expecting official reports from the US State Department, French Foreign Ministry, or a joint statement of all ambassadors of the EU and US that they would do everything possible for the Belarusian question to be introduced for debate; and for their official call for me to stop the hunger strike,"

The Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in Exile has called on Belarusian communities throughout the world, regardless of their political views, to ask their respective governments to take urgent steps to prevent this potential tragedy.

Please take steps to prevent a tragic death of Belarusian opposition leader.



Kazulin at wife's funeral

The same day the following response came from the State Department:

"Have forwarded your e-mail to the the appropriate people in Riga."

(The NATO Summit was being held in the Latvian capital of Riga, with President Bush, Secretary Rice and many heads of state of NATO countries in attendance.)

Within two weeks, the U.S. Embassy in Minsk made the following statement:

"On December 12 in the U.N. Security Council, the Acting Permanent Representative of the United States of America raised the subject of human rights in Belarus and the hunger strike of Alexander Kazulin. The United States is taking advantage of every opportunity to raise the subject of human rights in Belarus, such as the recently passed resolution in the U.N. General Assembly Third Committee. We applaud Mr. Kazulin's dedication, and are glad that by ending his hunger strike Mr. Kazulin will be able to make a continuing contribution to the cause of democracy and freedom in Belarus. The United States calls again upon the Belarusian regime to free all political prisoners."

While Russia's U.N. Representative left the session, refusing to discuss the Belarusian problem, Alexander Kazulin stopped his hunger strike, on its 53rd day, and began a slow recovery process.

U.S. Election And Belarusian Issues

The 2008 election campaign has raised a number of important domestic issues, such as the economy, health care and national security. The war on terror figured both as a domestic security issue, and as a foreign policy issue in fighting international terrorism in various places on the globe. Democracy building in the Middle East and in the formerly Soviet controlled lands of Eastern Europe remains a high priority issue for the foreign policy of the United States. With that in mind, the Belarusian American community has addressed presidential candidates John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama with questions that concern it deeply.

Belarusian-American 2008 Election Questionnaire:

1. What policy would you follow with regard to promoting democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law in the Republic of Belarus? And additionally, what is your view of the role of sanctions in this respect? Under the 14-year- long authoritarian rule of Alexander Lukashenka, Belarus has been referred to as "the last dictatorship in Europe." The United States to date has pursued several different strategies, but the situation in Belarus has not improved.

2. The Republic of Belarus has been the last among the states of the former Soviet Union in the amount of foreign aid received from the United States. The reason being given is the fact that Belarus has not established democracy and free enterprise. How would you expand the foreign aid line item for democracy programs that are acknowledged as desperately needed?

3. The electronic mass media in Belarus are totally controlled by the state. Shortwave radio broadcasts funded by the United States and the European Union have provided limited penetration from outside. Polish Public Television has recently initiated a satellite TV project known as BelSat, whose programs can reach the whole territory of Belarus. What U.S. media programs would you support to insure that objective information reaches the people of Belarus? Do you favor cooperation/joint funding with European allies on media programs directed at Belarus?

4. At the CSCE summit in Budapest in 1994, the Republic of Belarus had agreed to withdraw nuclear weapons from its territory under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The United States, United Kingdom and the Russian Federation have then signed a commitment to respect the independence and sovereignty of Belarus, and to refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate Belarus. What positions and steps would you take to prevent Russia's on-going economic pressure, as well as the establishment of the so-called Union State between Russia and Belarus, from threatening the sovereignty of Belarus?

Out With the Old

By Rodger Potocki and Iryna Vidanava

Editor's Note: The beginning of this article appeared in the previous (Winter 2007) issue of *Belarusian Review*.

The first part dealt with the following topics:

- **The Year of Setbacks**
- **Looking West, not East**
- **A March High**

DISENFRANCHISED GENERATION

Most traditional civil society groups led by the older generation, however, appear not to have benefited from the March Youth. In particular, opposition political parties have not capitalized on a new generation of politicized youth. Moreover, young people show little inclination to join parties.

Less than successful in reaching out to young people, the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) had to reestablish its youth wing in 2006, and the United Civic Party (UCP) did so only a few months ago. The youth wings of the Social Democrats and the leading party of the United Democratic Forces (UDF), the Party of Belarusian Communists, barely exist. Young people see little future in Marx, Engels, or Lenin. Political parties continue to be headed by older leaders, most of whom are veterans of the 1990s struggles against the regime.

Like many opposition leaders who seemed to discover but failed to engage young people for the first time after March, Sergei Skrabets, a former political prisoner, declared that he would create a national youth movement, but he never did. Such former dissidents, parliamentarians, Soviet era apparatchiki (several were old Communist Youth League, or Komsomol, leaders), and Lukashenka supporters have little to offer youth. They seem unable to speak a common language with a generation that came of age in the 21st century.

There has been an uneasy relationship between young activists and the opposition leadership since 2001, when party leaders settled on Vladimir Goncharik, a graying, communist-era trade union leader, as their candidate against Lukashenka. Young people active in civil society had nothing in common with this member of the Soviet nomenklatura and did little to assist his disastrous campaign.

In contrast, however, young activist campaigned hard for Alexander Milinkevich, the opposition's candidate in the 2006 elections. Milinkevich was a civil society activist and an academic with less baggage from the past and a track record of working with youth. In a December 2005 survey, more than one-third of those interviewed who supported Milinkevich were under 30.

Despite having a common enemy, there were differences between the older and younger generations even at the high watermark of March. Radical youth disagreed with the post-election strategy of the opposition leadership, criticizing its poor planning and timid tactics. In October Square, the divide between the "tent city" and a leadership that went home each night was clear. Despite his past ties to Lukashenka, another opposition presidential candidate, Alexander Kazulin, temporarily won over many young people with his more radical opposition and willingness to act at a decisive moment.

Since the heady days of March, young activists have become increasingly turned off by the political in-fighting, interests, and egos of the party leaders who head the UDF. Also, the young people who led and made up the square protests believed that they had earned the right to participate in the opposition's decision-making structures, but they were not allowed to take their place at the table. When internal gridlock resulted in little being accomplished by the UDF, many young people abandoned their newfound civic activism.

A key moment was the May 2007 Congress of Democratic Forces, which was dominated by political party leaders and removed Milinkevich from the leadership, further alienating youth leaders, many of whom boycotted the controversial event. In response, Milinkevich established a civic movement, "For Freedom," which is built mainly on post-2001 and March Youth.

Although a majority of young activists see Milinkevich as their best hope at the moment, many are tuning out because of his indecisiveness and reticence and questioning his commitment to youth. As one Young Front teenager put it: "We are for Milinkevich, but is Milinkevich for us?"

GENERATION GAP

As the fall 2007 marches made clear, the split between young activists and older opposition leaders is getting more acrimonious. At the time of the May Congress, several youth groups protested the leadership fratricide by issuing a manifesto, "Time to Win," which criticized the "old opposition" and "permanent leaders" while declaring that victory was only possible with the help of a "new generation of responsible young leaders."

Prior to the European March, five youth groups accused the opposition organizers of cowardice, weakness, and "betraying youth" by accepting the authorities' decree restricting the protest to the city's outskirts. Several days later, these activists sought to shame organizers by presenting them with scoops and pails used to clean up after pets. During the Social March, an opposition leader responded by saying that he couldn't find any youth leaders present to whom he could return the scoops. He also questioned the youth activists' leadership qualities and characterized some youth groups as "brainless, marginal, and manipulated by the secret services."

Behind this bickering, a generational shift is taking place in the opposition. A number of the youth active in March 2006 have become regional and operational leaders of Milinkevich's "For Freedom" Movement. And despite general disengagement from many political parties, several young politicians have reached the level of deputy chair in key parties, although none have been elected leaders. That may change, as some young Turks in the BPF try to win control of the country's most dynamic and active party.

Established NGO networks, like the Belarusian Association of Resource Centers (BARC), are declining and being supplanted by new networks of young activists, such as the Belarusian Association of Regional Development Agencies (Belarda). The centralized independent trade union structures, headed by the same leaders since the early 1990s, are moribund, but some regional branches headed by young leaders are showing some signs of new life.

Old non-government organizations, like the Belarusian Association of Journalists, have created youth departments. New NGOs that are focusing on cutting-edge issues, such as debating building a nuclear power plant in Belarus, organizing small entrepreneurs, the continuing impact of Chernobyl, and religious rights, are led by young activists. New think tanks, political parties, websites, and publications have been launched recently by youth activists.

Despite this generation gap, there is little proof that young people are turning to the "dark side." Belarusian youth may be quick to hope, but they are not easily deceived. The real impact of the regime's propaganda, mandatory state ideology classes, and repression seems overestimated.

Lukashenka has centered his youth policy on the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (BRSM), a state-controlled, mass-organized group modeled on the Komsomol. The BRSM has branches in all high schools and universities, monopolizes state activities involving students, operates a radio station and a travel agency, and organizes youth labor brigades.

Despite state pressure to join and attractive benefits, the BRSM does not seem to have many active adherents. In a recent student survey, 70 percent of respondents knew about the organization but only 26 percent admitted to being members. Some members were ashamed to acknowledge their status, while others claimed that they had been "enrolled" without their knowledge.

Although the organization claims to have 90,000 members in Minsk alone and a total of 430,000 members nationwide, it could muster only several groups of 20 to 50 members to hold counter-protests at Western embassies when thousands of young people were demonstrating regime in March 2006. This year, it could only assemble groups of 40 to 50 in the capital and the regions to celebrate its fifth anniversary. Financial reports indicate that members paying dues in Minsk total only 3,000.

While the BRSM is the best-known youth group in Belarus, its reputation is less than stellar. In a December 2006 youth focus group question about the BRSM, the terms "lie" and "pressure" were evoked frequently. BRSM has been linked to neo-Nazi groups tolerated if not supported by the regime. During the past summer there were discussions about BRSM creating paramilitary structures to "help maintain law and order" on the streets. Clearly, the regime's policies have not succeeded in winning over youth.

Lukashenka has criticized the state's other mass youth organizations for their "mistakes." In a leaked state survey of Gomel University students, only 17 percent of respondents indicated that it was important to be "patriotic." In a fall 2006 focus group, young people who took part in the March events but were not affiliated with any political party or NGO made it clear that their motivations for protesting were the limitations placed on their personal freedom, disgust with state propaganda, and anxiety about their own future and the future of the country. As Milinkevich has noted, "this generation wants more freedom, freedom of thought, and self-expression."

HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

Why, then, aren't there more young people openly in opposition? The bottom line is that the majority of young people in Belarus occupy a "grey area" of activism somewhere between the extremes of the opposition and regime supporters. They often are unknown and unseen by internal and external observers.

Ten years ago, a national survey of youth found that only 6 percent of respondents actually took part in protests. Today, not much has changed. A recent survey found that just 10 percent of students can be considered "active." More than 50 percent of respondents believe that their classmates are passive. Three quarters of the students surveyed had never collected signatures for a candidate (the least risky political activity in the survey), 56 percent had never participated in a demonstration, and 50 percent had never been involved in a charity event.

But while only a small part of youth said it is ready for open protest, a significant portion said it is dissatisfied with the current situation in the country. To the question, "what would you change if you were elected president of Belarus?" 16 percent of a group of non-active students answered "everything."

Thus, while most young people are politically passive, many are not apathetic. They are presently focused inward on activities promoting self-realization. More than 37 percent of students surveyed declared that the main value for them is "to be themselves," and another 32 percent cited "internal harmony."

Young people are participating in a broad range of independent activities, many of which are anti-establishment but not overtly political. Among other activities, they take part in underground publishing, environmental initiatives, local Internet radio, open-air music festivals, alternative religions, and amateur filmmaking. As one observer put it, "lots of small clubs are popping up, like mushrooms after rain."

While innocent enough, these youth initiatives are perceived as a threat in "Europe's last dictatorship," where any independently organized activity is considered dangerous. They usually take place, however, below the authorities' radar screen, and even that of the opposition. Sadly, when the mainstream opposition does take notice of some unconventional youth activity, like graffiti art, it sometimes joins the regime in condemning it as "anti-social behavior."

But many people – youth and observers alike – believe such independent initiatives shouldn't be discounted. Young people are self-organizing, establishing small personal networks, carrying out local actions, and expressing their independence. As one activist who works with youth explained, these creative youth initiatives "are eroding this regime and its ideology from the inside."

Together, these activities are contributing to a growing and evolving civil society. In contrast to many higher-profile political actions, some of the campaigns have achieved concrete results. Over the course of 20 years, for example, the underground counterculture magazine Idiot has attracted and promoted creative activists in Vitebsk. More recently, students launched a campaign and were successful in convincing the administration of Belarusian State University to build parking spots for bikes. Through other efforts, youth groups were able to get radio stations to play more Belarusian music and cell phone and Internet companies to translate their websites into Belarusian.

VIRTUAL DISSIDENTS

Perhaps more importantly, like their peers around the globe, young Belarusians are merging their eclectic activism with the Internet. According to statistics from December 2006, 32 percent of the working population of Belarus regularly use the Internet. Of that figure, half are people younger than 30.

In a recent survey, students cite virtual activities as second in popularity only to going to discos, clubs, and movies. While most young Internet users in Belarus consider the Web to be primarily a source of entertainment, those heading online can't avoid the news and other serious information posted on Belarusian web portals. Dozens of NGOs and independent newspapers have their own websites, and some of them are more popular sources of information than local state newspapers and websites.

A leaked state survey of students at two universities in Gomel found that more than a third of respondents listed the Internet as their primary source of information — and this figure is from one of the country's least developed regions.

Other than the websites of state newspapers, the regime's presence on the Web is relatively minimal. The regime fears the Internet as a source of independent information that circumvents its media monopoly, propaganda, and ideology. But even more threatening is the growing number of young Belarusians joining the Web 2.0 generation. As kitchens were for their parents in Soviet times, the Internet has become a place where young Belarusians interact with others, discuss events, exchange opinions, and share ideas.

Students surveyed mentioned they frequently take part in Internet forums, chats, and blogging. Online, young Belarusians are finding like-minded peers who share the same values, join with them in virtual communities, and even interact in real life. Thousands of members of social networking sites are sharing breaking developments with each other, including information that does not find its way into the mainstream state or even independent media. Belarusian youth dominate the country's LiveJournal community, the world's 15th largest.

The past year has shown that the Web is being used effectively to improve and increase the boom in youth self-organizing. After the "tent city" was demolished, young activists took refuge in various online communities. The Internet became a virtual square, where young activists camped out, held fireside chats, and cooked up new forms of resistance. The Web has improved the security and dissemination aspects of their actions because of enhanced discussion. Today, hundreds of young people are planning and coordinating civic and political actions online.

In March 2007, Belarusian bloggers successfully launched an Internet campaign to collect bail money for Dzianis Dzianisau, a youth activist and one of the "tent city" leaders who was imprisoned for his political activities. In Grodno, blogs have become the focal point of efforts to mobilize citizens to defend the city's historical monuments, which are being destroyed under the pretext of reconstructing the Old Town.

OPPOSITION DOESN'T GET IT, EITHER

Despite the scale and diversity of youth activism, opposition leaders still don't really understand youth initiatives. In addition to the generation gap, there is also a digital divide between the traditional opposition and the new wave of youth activists.

All is not split, however, as some older opposition leaders are using the Web. For someone who still writes his speeches by hand, for instance, Milinkevich's recent decision to start blogging is quite revolutionary. Also, the blog of Ales Michalevic, a 30-something deputy chairman of the BPF, is

already one of the most popular political sites on Belarus' LiveJournal.

But there is also a creativity gap. After 13 years of ineffectual struggle, the older generation does not respond well to new challenges and is suffering from a dearth of new ideas. Around the time that BPF leader Vincuk Viachorka led the older generation on yet another march commemorating Belarusians executed by Stalin's NKVD, his son Franak organized a flash mob that mocked the 130th birthday of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the predecessor of the NKVD and KGB, by laying a toy gun at his statue.

Moreover, some of youth's political passivity is attributable to lackluster mentorship. Focus group participants indicated that youth do not find the "old opposition" to be interesting. "The protests should be more fun," said one young activist at the European March. "There should be fewer boring speeches with superficial words."

Despite their skepticism, however, young activists respect the experience and achievements of the older generation, especially in the fields of promoting independent education, defending human rights, and fostering national culture. Participants of youth focus groups said they were ready to share their ideas with democratic leaders and to take part in actions addressing concrete problems, such as Lukashenka's plan to build a nuclear power plant. This indicates the possibility for cooperation.

To make any progress, the democratic opposition in Belarus must be united, inclusive, and broad-based. At the moment, a majority of the young generation is neither influenced by the opposition nor controlled by the regime. Opposition leaders must hear the voices of the new generation, acknowledge its grievances, redress the generation gap, and channel the energy of young people toward promoting democratic change.

Youth activists have always been the foot soldiers of the opposition's campaigns, and they likely will be again during the 2008 parliamentary elections. The greatest legacy of March 2006 is that young people seem to have shaken off their fear of the regime. Many are ready and willing to be more politically active, but they want to call some of the shots and be taken seriously.

Source: Transitions On Line, 4 December 2007

Belarus' Forum

Current National Objectives

(Excerpts from an article in *Nasha Niva*)

By Siarhiey Bohdan

The issue of language has played an essential role in Belarusian politics for several centuries - during the Polish, Russian, German, Soviet and other historical periods.

Conflicting views on who should use what language will remain on the agenda of our country's public life for long decades to come. The result of these conflicts depends not as much on today's political status, as from the will of users of Belarusian. This desire must be evident in a realistic political landscape. Events of the last few months allow us to arrive at some practical conclusions concerning the further expansion of the Belarusian language and culture in our society.

Realistic policies

The meeting of Belarusian-language musicians with representatives of the presidential administration, and the resulting horse-trading session, must be assessed from several differing viewpoints. I will not dwell on the ethical or commercial aspects of this agreement that is based on the principle of "Music for Non-opposition." Instead, I will stress the realistic political approach to the issue. Specifically, the business meeting of musicians with authorities may be regarded as an example of how this approach may be applied. It took place due to the subjective, and possibly, instinctive readiness of both sides to apply this approach, as well as, to the objective presence of three mandatory factors required by such realistic political business transactions.



Siarhiey BOHDAN

First: it became possible, because both sides had something of interest to offer the other side, and realized it. The presidential administration had the virtually unlimited power to decide who, what, where, and when the musicians would be allowed to sing in Belarus. The musicians had their talent, notoriety and influence on the connoisseurs of their creations.

Second: both sides were ready to barter their secondary activities and influences, whose loss would not significantly harm their truly vital concerns. This means that the Administration was not opposed to allowing some presence of Belarusian-language musicians on stage and in the media. In return, the musicians were not opposed to departing a little from their hitherto clear support of opposition forces, since the infrequent concerts held during rather poorly attended opposition enterprises or in the underground, clearly did not satisfy the creative ambitions of today's songsters. Actually, the infrequent "oppositionist" appearances at home had long ago lost their value for the musicians themselves. In addition, in their appearances abroad the ensuing image of them as persecuted balladeers did not bring these Belarusian groups enough fame to replace concert opportunities at home.

Third: an additional effort was exerted by both sides to change the current situation and their roles. By separating the musicians from the opposition, Pralaskouski hoped to weaken the regime's opponents by depriving their actions of musical accompaniment and thus reducing them to a repetition of the same speeches by the same leaders, who

have already been successfully marginalized in Belarusian society, and therefore made harmless. Dancing in the Square to the tunes of live music is certainly more enjoyable than just shivering in the cold while listening to the same old speeches.

Musicians aspired to garner opportunities for development, and without hope for an opposition victory in the near future, they were ready to try to achieve something by entering separate talks with authorities.

This is why Pralaskouski's meeting with musicians bore fruit. Belarusian culture, language and music all profited from it. Let us note that in considering the possibility of compromise or agreement between the regime and other forces in any area, it pays to pursue exactly this type of strategy, remembering all the factors and necessary preconditions. If the opposition forces lack such strategies, it is naive to expect a dream of national unity or consensus. One should prepare preconditions for a realistic political dialogue. Until such time we should not surrender our positions or come up with naive proposals. When one side has nothing valuable to offer to the other side in exchange for something it considers important, capitulation is inevitable. Such laws prevail in contemporary Belarusian politics.

Our Will

Even advocates of classical orthography and non-Soviet language rules are now being more loudly and more loudly admonished to compromise, (read: capitulate) - "to do anything to save our language." Even though I am also ready to compromise, this latest attempt reminds me, that, at least in my memory, for the Belarusian national democracy, such compromises represent its basic form of existence - compromises putting in question the democracy's adherence to firm convictions and principles.

Actually, Belarusian national democrats, (and other oppositionists), have always agreed to so-called "compromises," - sooner or later. Probably only Zianon Pazniak may be said to stubbornly define and defend his convictions.

Such compromises have allowed many oppositionists to keep existing in the political arena for many years by always retreating in response to the authorities' orders, by not undertaking any special actions, and thus not harming nor irritating the authorities. This course is safe, and coupled with certain bluffing abilities, such existence is fairly comfortable - it facilitates the prolonged activity of supposedly important political figures. This observation applies not only to politicians, but also to many other public personalities in Belarusian independent society. The so-called "compromise," actually a consistent retreat from any firm positions, has become a basic form of their existence.

In principle, flexibility and readiness to compromise make sense only when coupled with firm will power and a clear sense of direction. Why should the predator wish to negotiate with those who will retreat anyway, once they see his teeth and claws? Of course, the world does not consist of only predators and blood. Yes, human beings should treat each other as brethren. However, the present situation in Belarusian politics is such that the rules are set up by people adhering to entirely different principles. Moreover, even liberal and democratic societies are bound to be hurt by people lacking their own resolve and the willingness to stand up for their beliefs. Houses are never built on sand.

We realize now, that our national movement should finally discontinue its mode of retreat, hiding behind the politically correct mask of compromise. It is not even important where this retreat should stop. Furthermore, we don't have much choice, since we have been retreating seriously, for such a long time that only few of our positions have not been given up. The time has come to issue an order to ourselves: "Not a step backwards." We do not reject a real compromise, when both sides are seriously negotiating. However, we should fortify certain of our positions - at least to maintain their recognizability.

... The non-Soviet language rules, (including the tarashkevitsa orthography), as well as the (white-red-white) national flag and the emblem, Pahonia, must not be surrendered nor negotiated. This must be our clear national will. The rules of our literary language may be further improved and "tidied up," but only on our own foundation. For the requirements of the nation's everyday life, they should be reviewed by educated linguists, not by government-appointed officials. Of course, present publications in the tarashkevitsa may have to change orthography, when, for instance, this would save them from eradication. However, under such circumstances, they should then announce that the change is temporary and due to a greater need. In addition, the national movement must restate that it is not renouncing its values, and that the basic rules of our language are not to be negotiated.

...The Belarusian language and its rules - not castrated by artificial interventions - should not be the subject of experiments. They represent our national values, not to be doubted or negotiated.

Sounds and Letters

However, these values are not worth anything, if their "carriers," (in this case, Belarusian language users), are not doing enough for their sake.

It becomes especially important to clearly define the non-Soviet rules of pronunciation, after a possible and hopefully not imminent, delegalization of all orthographic rules, not approved by the state. Actually, it is not just the matter of the Soft Sign alone. It is a matter of the last chance for preserving basic features of our language - soft consonants. This is why it is so essential for us to denote these features. Some people already don't remember how Belarusian words should be pronounced.

If we ever lose the capability to print our publications in the kind of orthography that allows easy reading of Belarusian texts, according to natural Belarusian pronunciation, then everything will depend on oral rendition of our language in publications and the press. Such non-Soviet pronunciation must be heard from thousands of "carriers", so that people will pronounce words correctly without even seeing the Soft Sign letters. There is a need now to create such carriers.

Thanks to the latest means of technology, this becomes an increasingly simple task. Well-read audio-books may be

satelite TV station is beyond our financial means. The existing BELSAT channel leaves much to be desired thus far,. One solution could be a less ambitious, yet realistic and promising project of TV on-demand. Fundamentally, it would involve the creation of a Belarusian version of YouTube: posting at first shorter, topical video-materials in Belarusian on the Internet, that could be viewed any time.

How expensive would it be for a Belarusian newspaper to create regular 60-second news summaries (like those produced by BBC) in good Belarusian, and post them on the Internet, or, following the example of *The New York Times*, produce sound tracks for parts of the newspaper in an abbreviated and illustrated form? Longer video-materials, or even films, could be published and efficiently distributed on regular CDs. This approach would not require millions of dollars, or an extensive staff.

* * *

What is needed is the will and desire. They determine who will win. Renouncing violence and firmness in defending one's views are not mutually exclusive principles. Tibet's Dalai Lama and India's Mahatma Gandhi are examples of this approach. Non-violence does not mean retreat.

Source: *Nasha Niva*, January 14, 2007
Translated from Belarusian by George Stankevich

HISTORICAL DATES

February 1, 1661

Inhabitants of the city of **Mahilou** rose against the Muscovite occupying army. Assisted by troops of the Grand Duchy of Litva, they liberated their city for the duration of the 1654 war.

February 2, 1838

Birthdate of **Kastuś Kalinouski,** leader of the anti-Russian national uprising of 1863-1864.

March 21, 1840

Birthdate of **Francishak Bahushevich,** poet, lawyer and pioneer of the Belarusian national revival.

March 22, 1864

Kastuś Kalinouski, the leader of the anti-Russian uprising was executed by Russian czarist authorities in Vilnia.

March 25, 1918

Belarus' Independence Day (Day of Freedom) — Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) was declared an independent state by the Executive Council of the First All-Belarusian Congress, in Miensk.

April 4, 1557

450th anniversary of birth of **Leu Sapieha,** a renowned statesman, chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Litva, and compiler of Litva's collection of laws — the Lithuanian Statute.

Thoughts and Observations

Police Beating Linked to U.S. Trip

A Belarusian activist has told RFE/RL that his beating by police during a demonstration in Minsk is linked to his recent trip to Washington, where he met with the U.S. president and testified before a Congressional commission.

Following the incident, the United States has warned Belarus that it may extend sanctions against Belarus due to lack of progress in allowing democratic freedoms.

Zmitser Khvedaruk, fresh from the U.S. trip, was beaten by police on Nov. 12 while participating in a peaceful protest ahead of a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Witnesses have said the acting head of the Malady (Youth) Front was knocked unconscious by police and taken away from the rally in an ambulance.

Khvedaruk, speaking to RFE/RL's Belarus Service by telephone on December 13, said he believes he was singled out because of his recent meetings with the U.S. president and lawmakers.

"I think my beating was linked to my trip to America. There were many indications of that," Khvedaruk said.

"I was deliberately pushed behind the OMON [special police] cordon and there, separated from the demonstrators, knocked down and beaten. And then they threw me back, saying something like, 'Take your man back, he made a nice trip to America.'"

Putin Visit

Khvedaruk and about 200 others had assembled on the eve of a visit by President Putin to protest a possible merger between Belarus and Russia. There have been reports that such a merger might be on the agenda of the talks in Minsk between Putin and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.



Zmitser Khvedaruk

During a press briefing in Minsk on December 13, U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart condemned the Belarusian authorities' actions against Khvedaruk and participants of other recent protests.

"These brutal actions reverse what little progress had been made by the authorities in allowing peaceful protests. The Department of State in Washington has expressed my government's deep concern for all of these individuals, and we call on the Belarusian officials to ensure that all necessary medical care is given to those in need," Stewart said.

She said that in the continued absence of progress on the part of Belarusian authorities, "the United States prepares to take further steps against other state enterprises."

Following the Belarusian authorities' targeting of opposition supporters following the 2006 presidential election in which Lukashenka was elected to a third term in office, the United States and the European Union placed travel bans on Lukashenka and other government officials.

Broken Limbs

Khvedaruk said from his hospital bed during his telephone interview with RFE/RL that he appreciates the support he has received.

"I'm very grateful to my friends in the United States who have spoken in my defense and condemned [these] actions of the regime. I was not the only victim; another young man, Zmitser, had one leg broken, and a girl, Palina, had a finger broken," Khvedaruk said. "Many returned home from [the December 12] rally with bumps. I was taken to the hospital and was able to speak again normally only today."

Earlier on December 14, the U.S. State Department condemned the use of "brutal force" against protesters and accused Belarusian police of "specifically targeting" Khvedaruk when they dispersed the rally, leading to his hospitalization "with serious injuries." "This incident is another in a long series of repressive acts by the Belarusian authorities against their own citizens," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

The violent suppression of the demonstration also prompted an angry response from Congressman Alcee Hastings, the chairman of the U.S. government Helsinki Commission (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) before which Khvedaruk testified as part of a Belarusian opposition delegation visiting Washington.

"Unfortunately, the intimidation and abuse by [President] Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime does not seem to be coming to an end anytime soon," Hastings said in a statement. "My colleagues and I on the Helsinki Commission are determined to stand by young Mr. Khvedaruk and all those in Belarus — young and old — struggling for freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights."

Source: RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova Report, Jan. 3, 2007.

SPORTS

Three Silver Medals for Belarus

At the World Indoor Track & Field Championship, held on March 8-9, 2008, in Valencia, Spain, Belarusian athletes won silver medals in the following events:

• Andrey Krauchanka, in men's heptathlon, with 6234 points. Here are his statistics:
60 m. sprint - 7,19 sec.; broad jump - 7,63 m.;shotput - 14,29 m.; high jump - 2,15 m.; 60m. hurdles - 8,11 sec.; pole vault - 5,20 m.; 1000 m. run- 2:46 min.
• Women's 4x400m relay race - 3:28.90 min.
• Nadzeya Astapchuk, in women's shot put - 19,74 m.

Schengen Zone Expansion: Consequences for Belarus

By Dzianis Meliantsou

Europe's Schengen arrangement, which allows people to cross borders without having their passports checked, expanded on December 21 to include nine new members of the European Union — the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Three of these countries share borders with Belarus. What are the consequences of the move for the Belarusian citizens and the country's relations with the EU neighbors?

On 14 June 1985, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany signed an accord in Schengen, Luxembourg, to gradually abolish systematic border checks. The agreement included provisions on common policies regarding the temporary entry of third-country nationals (including holders of Schengen visas), the harmonization of external border controls and cross-border police cooperation. By the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, the accord was incorporated into the law of the European Union.

All 27 EU members, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland have signed the Schengen agreement, and 24 countries have implemented it so far. Ireland and the UK are only involved in cross-border police cooperation but are not part of the Schengen visa-free area. Switzerland, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania are expected to join the arrangement between 2008 and 2011.

Before 21 December 2007, the Schengen visa-free zone included Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

The EU foreign ministers agreed on November 8, 2007 to extend the Schengen area to the nine youngest EU states that joined the bloc in 2004. The ministers scheduled the removal of border controls at road checkpoints and seaports for December 21 and at airports on March 30, 2008. Once third-country nationals enter the zone, they are free to move across all member states.

Unfortunately, things do not look so bright from the other side of the EU border. Belarusians must pay higher visa fees to travel to EU countries, including the neighboring countries with which Belarus maintains close economic ties. Before December 25, a single-entry visa to Lithuania cost Ř5 (a multiple-entry visa Ř25). Latvia did not collect a visa fee. After the area's enlargement, the countries introduced a standard fee of Ř60 for both single- and multiple-entry visas. The decision was justified by the costs of the updated Schengen database of criminal records.

Although Schengen agreements require member countries to collect the same fee from third-country nationals, countries can reduce or waive fees for certain groups under national legislation aimed to promote cultural, foreign policy and other vital interests. Lower fees usually apply to children, schoolchildren, students, post-

graduate students and accompanying teachers who travel to take part in training, and researchers traveling with scientific purposes.

Before the new rules took effect, Belarus entered into talks with some of the prospective members like Poland and Lithuania on lower visa fees and additional categories of persons eligible for simplified procedures. Since the negotiations have not been transparent it is difficult to comment on progress before certain decisions are announced. Several foreign diplomats made it clear that the heads of diplomatic missions and consuls will be guided by the general rules and decide on discounts on a case-by-case basis.

Who will be affected by more expensive visas? Will the wall dividing the Belarusians from the EU be much higher and more difficult to climb?

Most of those who apply for visas are students who study abroad, tourists, those with family abroad, businesspeople, and the so-called *chelnoki* or cross-border shuttle traders.

Students could be the most affected because they are not economically independent. However, Belarusian students receiving instruction in EU countries are eligible for preferential treatment and are likely to get Schengen visas free of charge. The higher fee is unlikely to discourage tourists and business travelers who spend much money on air tickets and hotels. On the other hand, the Schengen area expansion creates new opportunities and benefits for travelers. For instance, flying from Vilnius to European capitals is cheaper than from Minsk or Moscow. Travelers no longer need to obtain separately a Schengen and a Lithuanian visa to fly from Vilnius. Shuttle traders, most of whom just smuggle goods across the border, will find it more difficult to substantiate their request for a multiple Schengen visa unless they have reliable "partners" or close relatives in EU countries. It will take them one trip to cover higher visa costs. It seems that the hardest hit will be people who often visit their relatives living across the border. But they are likely to become eligible for a simplified visa regime as a result of negotiations between Belarus and its neighbors.

Therefore, in contrast with allegations by Belarusian officials, more expensive visas will not substantially reduce the flow of travelers from Belarus to the EU.

The introduction of Schengen visas and new border and customs control rules by neighboring countries is more a political and diplomatic issue. Based on the principle of reciprocity, Belarus is supposed to complement visa formalities for the nationals of EU countries. However, Belarusian diplomats realize that the EU states that entered the Schengen zone have little room for maneuver because their visa and customs policies must be in line with EU regulations. The Belarusian authorities are unlikely to take tough measures in response to the tight border controls. On the other hand, the government has used the occasion to accuse the EU of erecting barriers for Belarusians and isolating the country.

The EU countries, especially Belarus' neighbors, have found themselves in an embarrassing situation. Despite declarations of willingness to boost ties with the Belarusian people (see the EU non-paper "What the European Union could bring to Belarus"), they must comply with the agreement and introduce more stringent requirements for citizens of countries outside the new Schengen zone. This is indicative of the lack of a consistent EU strategy with regard to Belarus.

European bureaucrats would like to offer Belarusians cheaper visas but they have no legal grounds to make Belarus an exception from the general rule. The EU could negotiate a special agreement with Belarus if it participated in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) like Ukraine or Moldova[1]. But the EU made Belarus' involvement in the ENP conditional on democratic change, which implies reform of the political system, something that authorities have flatly refused to accept. This means that Belarusian citizens pay for misunderstandings between the Belarusian government and European organizations.

So, why could not the EU offer preferential treatment to Belarus? If the EU can sign special agreements in the framework of the ENP, why can not it strike a special deal with Belarus under the document "What the European Union could bring to Belarus"?

European policymakers seem to consider Belarus a country of minor importance that does not qualify for a special clause in the EU's rules and procedures. Belarusian opposition politicians and analysts have blown what they call "the Belarusian issue" out of proportion. Belarus has been attributed a small role, which continues to diminish. For this reason, the EU makes no distinction between Belarus and other countries in its European Neighborhood Policy, has introduced more expensive visas, lacks a consistent program to engage with the Belarusian civic society, and came up with the non-paper "What the European Union could bring to Belarus" instead of a fully-fledged democratization strategy.

The Belarusian authorities seem to be benefiting from this frosty relationship. It helps reduce the EU's influence on the internal political situation in the country, while more expensive visas help limit Belarusians' contacts with the European reality. This explains the Belarusian government's unenthusiastic diplomatic effort to negotiate visa concessions with neighbors, its reluctance to introduce a visa-free regime with the EU and enact an agreement that would allow the EU to establish a delegation of the European Commission in Minsk.

Source: http://www.belinstitute.eu, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies

Quotes of Quarter

"If someone decides to devote his life to what I have., then he does not have to regret missing his youth. I have never regretted it. In Belarus it is very difficult to behave without avoiding politics. For instance, even speaking Belarusian is politics, since you are using a language that the state officials are not using and therefore label anti-state”

Artur FINKEVICH, recently freed political prisoner

A Satellite State

By Andrei Aliaksandrau

The Belarusian space program started with a crash and a bang, but scientists and the president still have their eyes on the stars.

It was nearly midnight on 26 July 2006, when President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and other dignitaries gathered in southern Kazakhstan to witness the launch of Belarus' first satellite. But within two minutes after takeoff, the Russian rocket carrying the machine and satellites from 17 other countries failed, sending the payload crashing to the ground.

One press report said the president "took the blow with dignity."

And determination, apparently. Barely two days later, Belarusian officials announced their intentions to build another satellite. It is slated for launch in late 2009.

Supporters say the program could boost the country's economy and defense, but critics call it a multimillion-dollar exercise in vanity.

One prominent Belarusian scientist said the effort is serious and will result in new technologies that the country can export.

"Not long ago we signed an international contract for delivery of technologies that help to process information about the earth and to create digital maps. We're quite strong at technologies of processing space information, and there's a great demand for them in the world," said Siarhej Ablamejka, director of the National Academy of Science's United Institute of Informatics Problems.

Already, Ablamejka said, Belarusian scientists have worked with their Russian counterparts to invent a method of thermal protection for space ships that is now in use for Mars landing projects.

But Anatol Liabedzka, leader of the opposition United Civil Party, said, "This project has no scientific or practical value. It's just that the long list of Lukashenka's historical victories and achievements does not have a line about turning Belarus into a space nation. Eight million dollars spent to satisfy his vanity could have been spent in a much more effective way."

BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME

In a modest way, Belarus is already a "space nation." Belarusian scientists have participated in Soviet and Russian space programs; two Belarusians, Piotr Klimuk and Uladzimir Kavalionak, were Soviet cosmonauts, and the parents of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, were from Belarus.

But these "space achievements" belong to the Soviet past. Independent Belarus has few such milestones of its own. The failed satellite was to change all that. It was dubbed BelKA – an abbreviation for Belarusian Space Apparatus as well as the name of a small, furry animal (*belka* in Belarusian means "squirrel"). One of the dogs in the Soviet ship Sputnik 5, which orbited earth in 1960, was also named Belka.

The recent squirrel's death in a fiery crash meant the loss of $8-10 million in development costs – covered by insurance – and two years' worth of work, according to various sources.

Scientists have promised that BelKA's successor will be more advanced. "A new satellite will be easier to operate, more reliable, light, and effective than BelKA," said Piotr Viciaz, the deputy chairman of Presidium of National Academy of Sciences. "We've learned the lessons of the past, and life goes on. We try to make use of the work we've done with the first satellite and to improve the quality and reliability of the satellite,

The satellite will contain a high-resolution telescope to take pictures of the earth's surface to be used in cartography, forestry, agriculture, meteorology, and emergency preparedness. It could also be used to explore a region in the northeast of the country where a new oil field has been discovered.

The project will likely have military applications as well.

"The basis of national space program should include the demands of our country to use space technologies for defense issues as well as for mastering new technologies," President Lukashenka said about a year ago at a meeting dedicated to the questions of space exploration with specialists involved in space program.

The second satellite will cost around $15 million, but some experts argue that it is not money that really matters in this case, but the reputation of the country and its leader.

A MATTER OF PRESTIGE

The space program has long been a pet project of Lukashenka, culminating in his disappointing visit to the launch pad in Kazakhstan two years ago.

"To tell you the truth, I agreed on creating a satellite not only because it was needed by our society and the state. It would be a great pity for me to lose you, clever people, who were involved in a space program some time ago," Lukashenka told a gathering of scientists in November, referring nostalgically to the Soviet era.

Valery Karbalevich, an analyst at the Minsk-based Strategy think tank, said that economically, it's clear BelKA's benefits didn't cover its costs. "But I think the president is a bit disingenuous. It's not humanitarian help to scientists, but political prestige of the state and its leader that really matters," Karbalevich said.

Aleksandr Vajtovich, a former president of the National Academy of Sciences who used to lead the country's space committee, said he thinks the aims of the program are misguided. "I think it would be more successful for Belarus to develop technologies connected with space communication," he said. "This sphere is more commercially successful. Our country isn't that big – you can take pictures from a plane if you need to.

"We should invest our money in highly profitable businesses that will give us the opportunity to find a place of our own in the high-tech structure of the world economy," Vajtovich added

Franco Bonacina, a spokesman for the European Space Agency, said the type of space equipment a country develops is not purely a matter of markets; it largely depends on the country's expertise and facilities. He said that about 13 percent of his agency's 2008 budget will go for Earth observation equipment, while 9 percent will be spent on telecommunications. Development of launchers, which are in great demand, will take up about 21 percent of the European agency's budget.

MINSK, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

Despite doubters, the Belarusian space program goes on, with plans for not only more satellites but also a flight control center in Minsk.

And Belarusian scientists are looking further ahead, to a third satellite, which will be equipped with a telescope able to focus on an area as small as one meter.

"The space market develops, and new requirements to equipment are introduced. If we build a telescope with such a resolution, it will make a Belarusian satellite more competitive on the world market," said Ablamejka of the National Academy of Sciences. The third satellite should be ready in four years.

In the meantime, when the second satellite goes into orbit within two years Belarus will have the chance to make the BelKA catastrophe a mere footnote. Whatever the motives, Belarus will forge ahead, per aspera ad astra – through struggles to the stars.

Andrei Aliaksandrau is the editor of the Ximik.info website, based in Navapolatsk, Belarus."

Source: Transitions On Line, 1 February 2008

Release of Political Prisoners in Belarus Sparks Debate

By David Marples

Over the past two weeks Belarus has released a large group of "political prisoners" from jails and camps across the country. They include activists, politicians, and some of the entrepreneurs who were arrested when protesting the restriction of their activities through new state laws. Significantly, former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin remains in captivity, but the apparent moderation of the regime's stance has fueled hopes that there could now develop a dialogue between the Lukashenka regime and Belarus. Thus in a late January interview with Belapan, Christiane Hohmann, spokesperson for European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner, commented that progress in democratization would be the key determinant of better relations between Belarus and the European Union.

The most recent high-profile release is that of Andrei Klimau, who was released from Mazyr penal colony #20 on February 15. A former parliamentary deputy, he was arrested last April for violating Article 361, Part 3 of the Criminal Code, which concerns public appeals to remove the existing government. While in Minsk remand prison, Klimau suffered a heart attack and the sentence handed down to him – two years in a strict-regime camp – was concealed from the public for several weeks. He has also spent time in prison on prior occasions and has been one of the most active opponents of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Interviewed about the conditions of his release, Klimau rejected any ideas that the regime had responded to any mercy plea. He noted that the relaxing of tension between the authorities and the opposition was a positive step that will "bring us closer to the European Union and offer open opportunities for dialogue." Other figures recently released include activist Andrei Kim, who was detained at the rally on behalf of the entrepreneurs, and Zmitser Dashkevich and Artur Finkevich, both high-profile Young Front leaders. One of their colleagues, Paval Sevyarinets, commented that Finkevich's release was geared toward appeasing the EU while arrests of lesser-known figures continued apace.

The releases have led to a new focus on Kazulin, who was sentenced to five and a half years of imprisonment in July 2006 after a protest rally to release prisoners detained after a large protest against the undemocratic nature of the presidential elections held the previous March. Kazulin subsequently went on hunger strike, which has reportedly resulted in irreversible damage to his health. A former rector of the Belarusian State University, Kazulin was the candidate most feared by Lukashenka, and he ridiculed the president during his two allocated 30-minute segments on national television during the electoral campaign. Amnesty International subsequently designated him as a political prisoner.

According to Kazulin's wife, Irina, the terms offered by the government for her husband's release are a "shameful escape from the country." His daughter Yulia noted that he has not been offered an amnesty. A recent analysis in the newspaper Belorusy i Rynok was skeptical of what is an apparent policy of releasing of political prisoners as bargaining chips in negotiations with Europe. Thus although the Belarusian side does not recognize the existence of political prisoners in the country, the president was able to take "an unprecedented step of goodwill." On February 12, speaking to students at the Belarusian State University, Lukashenka maintained that his government had fulfilled the first requirement, to improve relations with the EU. However, Kazulin remains in prison because, in the words of one critic, "freedom must be sold at the most expensive price." A major figure has to remain incarcerated for future gains.

A similar position was taken by one of the leaders of the European Belarus movement, Mikola Statkevich, during a visit to Sweden on February 11-14. Statkevich pointed out that the essence of the Lukashenka regime has not changed, no new laws have been issued, the parliament is still not elected on a democratic basis, the press is not free, and the courts are not independent. Others have commented also that despite the release of prominent prisoners, the Belarusian authorities have taken no steps to meet the

EU's demands in other areas – specifically the so-called 12 requirements for democratization.

So how does one explain the latest moves by the artful president? And when will Kazulin be released? Should the EU respond positively to these maneuvers?

For Lukashenka, the past two years have seen significant moves away from the Russian orbit. Though he may have hopes for better relations with the new Russian president after March 2, there are no indications thus far that the predicted victory for Dmitry Medvedev will bring significant changes to the cold relationship. Therefore the president hopes to gain concessions from the EU.

Realistically, dialogue may be as appropriate a way to deal with Lukashenka as isolation, but the regime is unlikely to evolve in any significant way. In fact, the manipulation of incarcerated prisoners for political gains seems as cynical as any of the president's earlier policies. Lukashenka has not conceded very much, and little can be expected in the way of real democratization, which is fundamentally alien to his regime. As for Kazulin, there are various pros and cons of authorizing his early release, but he is now the chief pawn in the president's chess match with Brussels and is part of the endgame rather than the initial negotiations.

Belorusy i Rynok, February 18; www.charter97.org, February 15; *Associated Press,* February 13; *Belorusskie novosti,* January 30.

Source: Jamestown Foundation,
Eurasia Daily Monitor, February 26, 2008

U.S. AMBASSADOR LEAVES BELARUS

By David Marples

A diplomatic dispute between Belarus and the United States reached a new low on March 12, when U.S. Ambassador Karen Stewart was recalled to Washington for talks. Earlier State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey had declared that the ambassador would remain in Minsk despite the Belarusian government's strong recommendation that she leave, and following the recall of its ambassador in Washington, Mikhail Khvastou.

The dispute centers on a number of issues: first, sanctions imposed on the consortium Belnaftakhim and U.S. insistence that Belarus must release all political prisoners – specifically Alyaksandr Kazulin – before relations can be normalized. Second, according to Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, a related issue is the launching of a Belarus-Venezuela venture that will allow both countries to obtain oil from the Guara Este field in the South American country. Lastly, the Belarusian side appears also to be trying to create a rift between the United States and its close allies in the European Union, according to a Russian source. A brief chronology of these events is in order.

On November 13, 2007, the United States announced that it was imposing sanctions on Belnaftakhim, one of Belarus's largest petrochemical companies. Two days later, Ambassador Stewart was requested to visit the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, where she received a demand that the United States must unfreeze immediately all of the company's U.S. assets. On December 13, Ambassador Stewart warned that further sanctions could be imposed if the internal situation in Belarus did not improve. The statement evidently infuriated Lukashenka, who used a December 30 speech during a visit to an SOS Children's Sanatorium in Barauliany to declare that the Belarusian side would respond strongly to any further steps by requesting that the U.S. ambassador leave the country. Ten days earlier, Belnaftakhim had announced that the export of its oil products, chemical, and techno-chemical goods would be switched from the U.S. dollar to the Euro.

Following the release of several political prisoners by Belarus earlier this year, relations with both the EU and the United States improved, but the Belarusian side's refusal to release the last prisoner so designated – Kazulin, who had been allowed to attend his wife's funeral on February 26 – led to the new impasse (see EDM, February 28). Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs Uladzimir Navumau stated at a press conference on March 3 that there was no basis for Kazulin's release because an amnesty was dependent on a prisoner's good behavior, and the former rector of the State University had four "punishments" already, the most recent of which had been incurred in December 2007.

As a result of such intransigence, the United States expanded its sanctions to include all Belarusian petrochemical companies in which the government's share was 50% or more. In addition to the sanctions, both Washington and the EU imposed a visa ban on prominent Belarusian officials in April 2006, including the president and his chief advisers, which was widened last year.

Belarus responded to the heightened sanctions by recalling Ambassador Khvastou on March 7. Initially, the United States ignored the request that Ambassador Stewart should leave Belarus. Evidently the Foreign Ministry requested a second meeting on March 11, after which the ambassador left for Vilnius. The United States has affirmed, however, that it expects her to return once consultations are over.

Belarus insists that the United States is interfering in its internal affairs and violating a Memorandum signed between the two countries in 1994 when Belarus relinquished its nuclear weapons (an agreement in place before Lukashenka was elected president). A Russian analysis maintains that the Belarusians are trying to cause a wedge (klin) between Europe and the United States, citing the president's statement that "Belarus is a critical transport artery for the European Union…20-25% of natural gas to the EU travels through Belarus, as well as over 100 million tons of oil, or 40% of the oil that Russia supplies to the EU," and that the two sides are close partners. Belarus has recently appealed to the United Kingdom specifically to become a close trading partner.

Belarus also maintains that the Americans are incensed by its close friendship with Venezuela, which resulted in the launch of a joint oil company last December. About 7 million tons of oil are anticipated to be produced annually; Venezuela will receive 60% and Belarus 40% according to the terms of the agreement.

However, the main issue is Belarus's refusal to release Kazulin. The authorities are angry at what they perceive as the outspokenness of Ambassador Stewart on this issue. But, as former deputy foreign minister Andrey Sannikau has noted, logically the next move would be to declare the ambassador persona non grata and cease diplomatic relations, and yet this has not happened. Sannikau believes that the Belarusians are fearful of further sanctions that would be taken by the U.S. side.

For all their bluster, the Belarusian authorities are treading carefully. They do not want to release Kazulin, but they wish to take a firm stance against the United States without alienating the EU. The current course of action seems misguided. Ambassador Stewart intends to return shortly, but it is very unlikely that the Belarusian authorities will prevent her from doing so.

Kommersant, March 11; www.charter97.org, March 10; *Belorusy i Rynok,* March 10-17; *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta,* March 13; *International Herald Tribune,* March 12; *New Europe,* November 17, 2007.
Source: Eurasia Daily Monitor, March 14, 2008

Abandoning the "Golden Share."

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka on [Tuesday] March 4 rescinded the 1990s concept of a "golden share" with which the state could control private companies.

Lukashenka's press service said a presidential decree had done away with the practice, seen by Western investors as a hindrance to increased interest in the ex-Soviet state. "Abandoning this practice will help create favourable conditions for direct foreign investment in the Belarusian economy's real sector, the achievement of 2008 growth forecasts, an improved international rating for Belarus and the defence of investors on the securities market," it said in a statement. Lukashenka and other senior officials have called for improved relations with the West, including an influx of investment, since Belarus last year quarrelled with traditional ally Russia over energy prices.

Lukashenka, accused in the West of crushing fundamental rights, has pursued economic policies of heavy state intervention in the economy, including substantial subsidies and benefits. But authorities have also called for increased borrowing on international markets and selective privatisations.

Elena Rakava of the Institute of Privatisation and Management, discounted the effects of the "golden share" in post-Soviet Belarus but welcomed its disappearance.

"The very fact it existed, the fact that at any time the state could start issuing orders to a company someone had bought amounted to a scarecrow for all foreign investors," she said.

"But a real inflow of investment will depend on how consistent government policies will be," Rakava added.

Source: Reuters, March 4, 2008

Another Political Prisoner Freed

By Margot Buff

Belarusian journalist Alyaksandr Zdzvizhkou has been freed in the latest of several recent cases in which Western-designated political prisoners have been granted leniency, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported.

The former deputy editor in chief of the *Zhoda* newspaper confirmed his release in a telephone conversation with RFE/RL within hours of a closed-door meeting at which the Supreme Court shortened his sentence from three years to three months.



Alyaksandr Zdzvizhkou

"I was asked to leave my cell with all my belongings," Zdzvizhkou said."I thought theymight have decided to transport me to the [penal] colony. Later, it became clear that I was being processed for release." He added that rather than releasing him directly, authorities put him in a vehicle with tinted windows and, over his objections, drove him to a train station.

Zdzvizhkou was sentenced on January 18 but had been in detention since his arrest in November.

He complained that his incarceration had left his "hearing and sight deteriorated" and he had lost "half his teeth." He added that he was "feeling unwell" after his release and that "paramount for me now is to regain my health."

Zdzvizhkou was convicted of "inciting racial, national, or religious enmity or discord" after his newspaper reprinted controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. His former newspaper, *Zhoda* was ordered closed after the publication of those cartoons in 2006.

Zdzvizhkou's lawyer, Maya Alyaksandrava, told RFE/RL that the Supreme Court made the decision based on the "extraordinary circumstances" of the case, but did not elaborate.

"I had hoped for such a decision, but it was only a very slim hope," the journalist's mother, Hanna Zdzvizhkova, said upon hearing of his imminent release.

Prisoners of Conscience

Zdzvizhkou is one of several Belarusians considered to be political prisoners by Western governments and human rights groups. In recent weeks, at least four such prisoners of conscience have unexpectedly been set free by court rulings or extraordinary decrees by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Opposition leader and former lawmaker Andrey Klimau was released from prison on February 15 after a presidential decree, which he said came as a "complete surprise." He had been serving a two-year jail term that started in August for insulting the president and calling for revolution in an article posted on the Internet.

Two student activists, Artur Finkevich and Zmitser Dashkevich, both leaders of the Youth Front opposition movement, have also been released from prison or "light confinement" in detention facilities since the beginning of the year.

Jan Maksymiuk, the acting director of RFE/RL's Belarus Service, said Lukashenka looks to be responding to the European Union's demand that Belarus release political prisoners if it wants dialogue with the West. "Everything depends on one man in Belarus," Maksymiuk said.

The release of political prisoners has been at the top of the EU's list of conditions for Belarus to meet before it can expect improved relations with the bloc.

The Supreme Court's decision to release Zdzvizhkou came one day after the European Parliament on February 21 unanimously adopted a resolution calling on the Belarusian authorities to release Zdzvizhkou and another political prisoner, former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. Kazulin is currently serving a 5 1/2-year prison term for organizing antigovernment demonstrations in the wake of the 2006 presidential election, .

Zdzvizhkou is the head of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, or Hramada, the body that founded the *Zhoda* newspaper.

The European Parliament resolution has welcomed the recent releases but condemns new measures taken against opposition activists who have participated in peaceful demonstrations, some of whom have been jailed or expelled from university in recent weeks.

Source: RFE/RL, February 2008.

Belarusians choose EU

Flags of the European Union put up by activists of the civil campaign “European Belarus” at large roads going from Russia to Belarus. Every driver crossing Belarusian-Russian border on the route Moscow-Brest and Smolensk-Vitsebsk met European symbols.

Participants of the action attached flags to bridges, posts and electricity transmission lines. National flags were put up in some places as well. Many drivers greeted young activists.

“Those who cross the Eastern border of our country should get used to the fact that it will be a border of the European Union once. And that Belarus would meet its guests with European flags would be completely natural. Besides, the national flag which is banned now, will become a state symbol again. It is pleasant that those who saw the rally supported us,” told one of the participants of the rally.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, March 1, 2008

Kazulin Released For Wife's Funeral

By Aleh Hruzdzilovich and Ales Dashchynski

MINSK — In the early hours of February 26, Belarusian opposition leader Alyaksandr Kazulin was transported from the Vitsba-3 penal colony to his family home in the capital.

Belarusian authorities granted Kazulin, who is serving a 5 1/2-year sentence on charges of staging antigovernment rallies, a three-day release to allow him to attend the funeral of his wife, who died over the weekend after a long battle with cancer. After a spate of recent releases, Kazulin is now Belarus's last political prisoner.

Kazulin's departure from the prison was so discreet that not even a group of reporters gathered outside the facility were aware that he had left.

Back home in the family's flat in Minsk, Kazulin put aside any need for private grieving with his two daughters, Volha and Yulia. Instead, he was almost immediately on the phone, giving interviews and speaking to supporters, pacing up and down a corridor. In the living room stood numerous pictures, draped in black, of Kazulin's wife, Iryna, who died on February 23 of breast cancer at the age of 48.

"There were days when I received as many as 200 letters in jail," he told one caller as he paces back and forth. "The strange thing was that almost all of them were from foreign countries. Belarusians still need to wake up."

The Illegally Convicted A. Kazulin

Kazulin was driven surreptitiously from the Vitsebsk penal colony in an ordinary Zhiguli — the car of the warden, Vital Ahnistsikau.

Just a day earlier, Ahnistsikau had refused to grant Kazulin the temporary bereavement leave permitted under Belarusian law, telling journalists Kazulin was guilty of "disciplinary violations."

Late on February 25, however, he was apparently given a form authorizing Kazulin's release.

"You can't imagine what it was like in the colony at that point. It was surrounded by riot police. Inside there were security guards everywhere. No one was allowed to move," Kazulin said, describing the preparations for his clandestine release.

Earlier in the day, Volha and Yulia Kazulina had appealed to authorities in Minsk to secure their father's release, and organized a public gathering of remembrance for their mother.

Nearly 1,000 people flowed onto Minsk's October Square, holding lit candles and appealing for Kazulin to be allowed to attend his wife's funeral.

Kazulin recalled how he first heard his wife had died.

On the morning of February 24, Ahnistsikau called him to his office and showed him a telegram bearing the news. A day earlier, Kazulin had asked for access to a telephone to call home and speak to his wife, whom he knew to be gravely ill. But a phone, he said, was "not found."

The news of his wife's death was a terrible blow. He said he was devastated that he had not been able to support his wife in her final hours.

"I said: 'That's it. Up until now, my wife's illness was holding me back. Now nothing is holding me back.' And I immediately went on a hunger strike. I ripped off all my prison tags and said I wasn't going to follow the colony rules anymore. Then I wrote a four-page letter declaring my hunger strike and explaining my illegal arrest, and the necessity of being at my wife's funeral."

He signed his letter "the way I sign everything — 'the illegally convicted A. Kazulin.'"

"I said I was starting a dry hunger strike" -- refusing both food and water -- "and I said I was either going to bury my wife myself or be buried with her. I think [the authorities] already understood that I was resolute about my actions and of course I think the rally of solidarity that took place in Minsk and spread across the country also had a great impact on the regime."

'My Heart Is Breaking'

Kazulin believes his wife, who went public with her illness in an attempt to raise awareness about the disease, was "pushed to the final stage" of her cancer by the government -- starting with his arrest, shortly after the March 2006 presidential election, in which Kazulin was a candidate and an outspoken critic of the ruling regime.



Iryna Kazulina's funeral

"Alyaksandr Lukashenka knew well that she was already sick at that time," Kazulin said. Once he was sent to jail on charges related to the antigovernment rallies that followed the vote, Iryna "lost the strength she needed to fight her illness."

The last straw, Kazulin added, was an apparent deal offered last week by Lukashenka: Kazulin could receive an early release and help his wife seek treatment abroad -- but only, it was strongly implied, if the couple agreed to never come back to Belarus.

"If I had asked them to give me a million dollars, they would have, if it had meant getting me out of Belarus," Kazulin said.

But Alyaksandr and Iryna refused to agree to the conditions. The price they paid was never seeing each other again.

"My heart is breaking," Kazulin said. But he spoke calmly, certain that her death would not be in vain. In a video shot by RFE/RL, Kazulin says, "Her love, life, and death are saving the whole of society, making it cleaner and brighter, showing the people that one should fight unsparingly until the very end." He appears to take a certain satisfaction in the fact that the day of her death coincided with Fatherland Defender's Day in Belarus -- "she was the best defender," he says.

'I Feel More Free than Those Outside'

Kazulin said today's Belarus is not unlike a penal colony. "Only this colony is contemporary and modernized, and the ones in charge are the ones who are themselves guilty of crimes," he says. One-third of the letters coming in and out of Vitsba-3, he said, never make it to their intended destination. The majority of complaints about illegal detentions are never heard. As a former presidential candidate, Kazulin says his time in prison has proved a valuable experience that has exposed him to many of the harsher realities of Belarus -- trumped-up charges, arrests made to fulfill police quotas, and planting drugs on innocent suspects.

"Tens of thousands of these kinds of falsified criminal matters need to be reviewed," Kazulin said, suggesting that Lukashenka's past career as a penal colony official has much to do with the current problems in Belarus's penal system.

Kazulin was asked whether he had gotten used to life in prison. In response, he said he felt he remained a free man despite his incarceration. He endured punishments, hunger strikes, and solitary confinement, but he said he would never submit to pressure to confess to the charges against him.

"I will never sign any request for clemency," he said, before going on the attack. "During these three days I am free, I will sue Lukashenka for the pain and suffering inflicted on my wife, Iryna."

Why was Kazulin released? He says he's sure the public gathering late on February 25 made an impression on authorities in Minsk.

"When they saw more than 1,000 people last night [gathered on October Square], gathered in spite of the threat of a crackdown to remember Iryna, the authorities became afraid that thousands more would converge as they did two years ago" during the protests that followed the Belarusian elections," he said. "I thank all those people. The light always prevails."

The EU had also called for Kazulin's release

Source: RFE/RL, February 26, 2008.

BELARUS ABROAD

Finkevich: “European Way for Belarus”

“European issue is topical for Belarus more than ever. Today more then a half of the Belarus’ population stand for Belarus’ joining the EU,” former political prisoner Artur Finkevich, Young Front activist, said in an interview with Radio Svaboda. Artur was invited to Prague for One World-2008, the 10th international documentary films festival.

– Artur, a month has passed on Wednesday since you have been released from the Mahilou pretrial prison. Is this your first trip abroad after the release?

– Yes, I’m the first time abroad.

– Were you afraid you are on the list for the restricted to travel abroad?

– I think I’m included into this list. That is why I went through Russia: I went to Moscow by train, I went by a plane from Sheremetyevo.



Artur FINKEVICH

– Artur, are you first time in Prague? What is your impression of the city?

– Yes, I’m the first time in Prague. I have an absolutely positive impression of the city – it’s a historical center of Central Europe. Francysk Skaryna published his first book here. I was going to walk to the place where Skaryna was printing books, but, unfortunately, I just have had no time today

.– You were a participant of the Dissidents and Freedom conference, held in the frames of the One World human rights festival. Artur, what did you speak about at the conference?

– I spoke about criminal persecution of youth activists, about press conference of youth leaders, representatives of public organisations, including the Young Front, held in Minsk. It was announced at the conference that we would take active part in the civil campaign “European Belarus.”

I spoke that the European issue is topical more than ever for Belarus. Today more than a half of Belarus’ population stands for Belarus’ joining the EU, at the same time it is spoken all the time about a possible referendum for the adoption of the constitutional act with Russia. That is why we need to conduct a pro-Western, pro-European campaign, so it is “European Belarus” that should respond to “integration” steps made by Russia. We are going to collect votes for the European way for Belarus: we have an intention to collect about half a million votes. We are to promote the theme of the European Union among Belarusians, we will spread materials of the campaign, in particular spread the information about 12 proposals of the European Commission to the Belarusian authorities. We will also inform about political prisoners in our country.

– Did you draw parallels between the Belarusian situation and the situations in Burma or Cuba, for example?

– Well, the situations in these countries differ from the Belarusian one. I think, unlike these countries the situation at ours will change far sooner. We, as I think, will soon live in a free country with a normal civilized president, live in a free European family. Everyone just must take a resolute step.

– Artur, you were released a month ago, after two years of restriction of liberty, and then imprisonment. What did impress you most during this first month at large?

– Maybe it was the fact that the Belarusian society has changed in these two years. I am sure, the society has become more democratic and more people are not satisfied with the policy of the authorities. There have apparently become more displeased, after many people lost their social privileges. In my view, Lukashenka’s rating is no more than 25-30 per cent now...

– Your associate Zmitser Khvedaruk had his 20th birthday on 5 March. What would you like to wish him?

– I’d like to wish Zmitser health, happiness, every success in his endeavours. I’d like to wish him strength, physical and spiritual, and the rest will be all right.

– Artur, I know, you want to visit Alyaksei Shydlouski, who had asked for political asylum in the Czech Republic. You in turn were offered to leave Belarus. What is your attitude towards the political emigration?

– Every case is unique. It is absolutely wrong to judge or accuse a person, when he or she emigrates: every person has a right to have such a possibility. Everyone should sacrifice what he or she can sacrifice.

Considering the case of Alyaksei, who faced 8 -9 years of imprisonment, I support his decision to leave the country. I think he will be more useful here than in prison.

I’d like to visit him – he is somewhere near Brno. I don’t know if I will manage to find some time. In any case I’ll try to phone to him.

– We have an opportunity to listen to views of Vaclav Havel, that he shared when opening the Prague Dissidents and Freedom conference on 5 March. Havel suggested to think about why people become dissidents and how hard and unpredictable can their destiny be.

– I think, a dissident is not a profession chosen by a person at a certain stage of life. An ordinary citizen, living an ordinary life, can't decide all of a sudden: I'll be a dissident starting tomorrow. It can't happen so. You just decide to do what you find more correct, honest than other things — it is a civil choice. But this choice, this decision orients you in a certain direction, and soon you are facing another, more serious dilemma: living in harmony with yourself, with your conscience, feeling that you are faithful to your beliefs, or choose to adapt to the situation, do what others do. But if a person has made the first step, and then a second, third, he or she will learn some day that he is being called a dissident.

My experience, experience of my friends from Charter 77 and other independent initiatives that fought for human rights, came to an important conclusion. It is that one can't rely on fast success. It may happen that Don Quixote endeavours, ridiculed by everyone, will turn into a happy end. But it may also happen there will be no happy end, that suffering and grieve will continue, and persecution will become more severe."

- Vaclav Havel is one of the examples of that variant of development, when a dissident comes to power. When Czechoslovakia was a communist country, playwright Havel was one of the initiators of Charter 77. He got 4 years in prison for that. After the 1989 Velvet Revolution Havel became the president of Czechoslovakia, and later the president of the Czech Republic for two terms. Havel has always expressed solidarity with democratic forces of Belarus, raised Belarusian issue in his publications and speeches. Artur what is your attitude towards Vaclav Havel?

– Frankly speaking, it is an example of a European president, who came to power by means of people's protest. He is a man who has always supported democratic forces in Belarus, met with its representatives and helped a number of Belarusian dissidents.

– Artur, your mother worried a lot when you were behind bars. Did she support at first your active public position? Was she against it?

– Of course, any mother worries about her son, her child. Did my mother support me at first? I think so. She has always supported me in all my endeavors.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, March 2008.

Nordic Youth Council Pushes For Democracy in Belarus

The Nordic Youth Council calls on the Nordic Council to exert pressure for democratic reforms in Belarus. The youth politicians are also calling for discrimination against the disabled and ethnic minorities to be put on the Nordic agenda.

"Belarus is a forgotten dictatorship," says the Danish president of the Nordic Youth Council, Lisbeth Sejer Gotzsche. Following the meeting of the Presidium on Tuesday, the NYC requested that the Nordic Council focus on Belarusian human rights and freedom of speech. This refers, amongst other things, to an incident three weeks ago when the Nordic Youth Council attended a meeting in Minsk and witnessed ten Belarusian young people being arrested and three of them remanded in custody because they took part in a demonstration.

At their meeting on Tuesday the Presidium called for the Nordic Council to place equality and discrimination on the Nordic agenda, with particular focus on ethnic and sexual minorities as well as the disabled. "We must treat people as resources and not as a burden," says Gotzsche.

The Nordic attitude is against discrimination, says the president of the NYC. She believes that the difficultly lies in implementing it and that the state should lead by example in regard to employing disabled people and ethnic minorities.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, January 30, 2008

Belarusian Statehood — Past, Present and Future

was the title of the international conference commemorating the 90th anniversay of the proclamation of independence of Belarusian Democratic Republic.

The conference was held on March 22, 2008, in Prague, - under the auspices of Karel Schwarzenberg, minister of the foreign affairs of the Czech Republic.

Keynote speeches were delivered by:

- Ivonka J. Survilla, President, Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic
- Zianon Pazniak, Chairman of the Belarusian Christian Party BNF
- Siarhej Shupa, Editor, Radio Free Europe, Publisher of *Archives of the Belarusian Democratic Republic.*

The conference proceedings consisted of two panel discussions:

History and Current State of the Belarusian Statehood, with following participants:

- Ivonka J. Survilla
- Uladzimir Arlou, Belarusian writer
- Jan Ruml, president of Civic Belarus; former dissident and Czech minister of interior.

Perspectives of the Belarusian Statehood, with following participants:

- Zianon Pazniak
- Paval Sieviaryniec, former leader of Malady Front and political prisoner
- Siarhej Ablamejka, Editor, Radio Free Europe, historian

Quotes of Quarter

"Europe and the United States must increase the significance and coordination of their programs to support democracy and the rule of law in countries lacking it. Such programs are significant for Russia and Belarus, where the dictatorship is practising total oppression."

Sen. JOHN McCAIN, U.S. Republican presidential candidate, interviewed by the newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung on February 8.

Belarus Week Was Held In European Parliament

A series of events collectively named Belarus Week took place in the European Parliament in Strasbourg between March 10 and 13 on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR).

According to the office of the initiator of the Belarus Week, Polish parliamentarian Jacek Protasiewicz, the program of the events featured a showing of a documentary by Yury Khashchavatski, exhibitions of works by artists Alyaksey Marachkin and Ryhor Sinitsa and photographers Ihar Krasewski and Adam Tukhlinski, and a concert by prominent folk rock singer-songwriter Zmitser Vaytsyushkevich and his W-Z Orchestra.

The program also included meetings with members of Belarus' pro-democratic opposition, their press conference, and a round-table discussion on "Independent Belarus as an Integral Part of Europe."

Guests of the Belarus Week were expected to include European Parliament President Hans-Gert Pöttering; Joseph Daul, chairman of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats; and Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.



In the forefront:
Ivonka Survilla, Ina Kuley, Stanislau Shushkevich

Twenty-four Belarusians have been invited: Stanislau Shushkevich, the first Head of State, the former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich; Ivonka Survilla, the Canadian-based head of the BNR Rada (government in exile); Lyavon Barshchewski, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front; and Yaraslaw Ramanchuk, deputy chairman of the United Civic Party.

The Belarus Week was organized and financed by the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats.

NEWS BRIEFS

The source of items in the NEWS BRIEFS section is the RFE/RL Newsline, unless otherwise indicated.

1. POLITICAL OPPOSITION

December 19, 2007

BELARUSIAN SUPREME COURT DENIES REGISTRATION OF MOVEMENT FOR FREEDOM

The Supreme Court of Belarus on December 18 upheld a Justice Ministry decision to deny registration to the Movement for Freedom, an organization led by former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Belapan reported. The Justice Ministry has twice turned down the Movement for Freedom's requests to be officially registered: in July, citing alleged flaws in the organization's charter, and in October, arguing that the movement's founding conference violated the law governing mass events. Founders of the Movement for Freedom claimed that the law on mass events does not apply to the founding conference of a nongovernmental organization. "If the Supreme Court finds that the Justice Ministry's arguments are true and does not oblige the ministry to register us, we will hold founding conferences and apply for registration time and time again," Milinkevich said at the court. "We will force the situation to absurdity," he added.

February 5, 2008

BELARUSIAN ACTIVISTS SET UP COMMITTEE TO DEFEND YOUNG OPPOSITIONIST

Belarusian opposition politicians and civil-society activists on February 4 set up a civic committee for the defense of Andrey Kim, against whom the authorities recently began criminal proceedings, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Kim was sentenced to 10 days in jail for his participation in a unsanctioned January 21 demonstration against the government's restrictions on businesses activities, but has not been released after serving his term. The authorities have charged Kim with hitting an officer during police attempts to take control over the crowd of protesters on January 21. The article under which Kim is charged provides for a prison sentence of up to six years. "Kim's case is politically motivated," said Andrey Bondar, one of the committee's members, adding that this is "the revenge of the government and of Interior Minister Uladzimir Navumau in particular for the scare that the entrepreneurs' protest gave them." Politician Pavel Sevyarynets said that the authorities launched the criminal proceedings against Kim even as "statements [were made] about a softening of the regime in Belarus." "Such statements are false.... The intimidation of society in Belarus has actually gotten worse and the so-called thaw is merely window-dressing for other countries," Sevyarynets said. "I believe that truthful coverage of the case of Andrey Kim and other opposition activists will help them avoid criminal conviction," he added

February 7, 2008

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST DENIES HIS RELEASE IS SIGN OF LIBERALIZATION

Artur Finkevich, leader of the unregistered Youth Front organization, said on February 6 that his release from prison does not mean that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime is loosening its grip, Belapan reported. Finkevich was

immediately released after the court that was considering his appeal reduced his term from 18 to six months. "Yes, the authorities released me, but they simultaneously took repressive measures against other representatives of the opposition," Finkevich said. He also said that the government's concessions are a result of pressure from the public and the West, but "these still are small concessions" that do not constitute "a consistent course toward the liberalization of the regime." Also on February 6, U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart welcomed Finkevich's release and said that the United States hopes "to see the remaining political prisoners released." The United States considers three other people to be political prisoners: former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, former legislator Andrey Klimau, and journalist Alyaksandr Zdzvizhkou.

February19, 2008

BELARUSIAN ENTREPRENEURS HOLD PROTEST IN MINSK

Around 50 small-business owners and their associates on February 18 held an unsanctioned demonstration in central Minsk to protest recent restrictions on the activities of small businesses, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Protesters demanded the reversal of the presidential decree forbidding them from hiring employees other than three family members, as well as unbiased coverage of their activities on state television. After an hour and a half, riot police dispersed the demonstrators, detaining several people. Among those detained were Movement For Freedom leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich. After spending several hours at the police station, all were released without charges. Two days before, during an unrelated event police detained at least 30 members of the unregistered organization Youth Front who gathered in a private house outside Minsk to hold a meeting of the organization's council. All of them were released several hours later the same day without charges. The Justice Ministry has rejected the Youth Front's applications for legal status five times, though it was recently registered in the Czech Republic.

February28, 2008

BELARUSIANS PAY TRIBUTE TO IMPRISONED POLITICIAN, DECEASED WIFE

Nearly 1,000 people attended on February 27 a requiem mass in a Minsk church in tribute to Iryna Kazulina, the wife of imprisoned former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Several hundred people attended her burial in the village of Tarasava near Minsk. Those present included many prominent figures, such as politicians Stanislau Shushkevich, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Syarhey Kalyakin, and Yury Khadyka, as well as U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart. The family wanted to bury Kazulina -- who died after a long fight with breast cancer and during her life contributed much to organizations working with cancer -- at the Minsk cemetery reserved for prominent figures, but the authorities did not give permission. For Kazulin, who was granted a three-day leave to attend his wife's funeral, the short period of freedom also became an occasion to relax and give the public his assessment of ongoing political processes. At an online conference arranged by RFE/RL's Belarus Service, Kazulin confirmed that he has not been broken by prison and that he is ready to withstand even more pressure. Kazulin was arrested during antigovernment demonstrations that followed the March 2006 presidential election and sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for organizing events that disturbed the public order. "Earlier, I was not a politician, but I have turned into one now after passing all these ordeals," Kazulin said the conference. "My goal is to serve my people and my Belarus. I will not spare anything for this, including my life. And these are not hollow words," he said. Kazulin suggested that the Belarusian authorities, if they consider his early release at all, will not release him before March 25, when the opposition intends to mark the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, which is regarded by pro-democratic Belarusians as a key event in the formation of Belarusian statehood in the 20th century.

February 29, 2008

BELARUSIAN POLITICIAN REPORTS BACK TO PRISON

Alyaksandr Kazulin, an imprisoned former presidential candidate who was granted a three-day leave to attend the funeral of his wife, returned on February 28 to the prison near Vitsebsk as required, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. At a press conference arranged by Belapan just before his return to prison, Kazulin made several final assessments of his short period of freedom. He said he forgives Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka for everything. "My family forgives him for everything. Let it remain on his conscience what he has done," Kazulin said. "Whatever we may wish, Lukashenka is part of our history. And despite many sins that the present-day authorities have committed, they have a chance to pause and think." Kazulin also said that he no longer intends to go on hunger strike, arguing that his supporters who attended the wife's funeral asked him not to do so. "They came up to me, expressed their condolences, and said that I should not declare a hunger strike, as they need me to be alive," he said. Kazulin confirmed that he was offered a release from prison on condition that he leave Belarus and no longer be involved in politics. Kazulin said that German Ambassador to Belarus Gebhardt Weiss played a significant role in making this offer and was "very sincere in his intention to help." According to Kazulin, it was suggested at the highest government level that he should travel to Germany together with his family, where the best possible conditions would be offered to them. "It was unclear in what status I was to go to Germany," Kazulin said. "I was told that this matter would be settled later, and that there might be a new amnesty. They also said that I might be allowed to return after half a year or a year." However, Kazulin denied that his wife was offered treatment in Germany. Lukashenka previously announced that the authorities offered Kazulin the chance to accompany his wife for treatment to Germany, but Kazulin rejected the offer. Kazulin said he will not leave Belarus. "I will try to bear all the tribulations and hardships of our modern reality that our people are undergoing," he said. Kazulin, who ran in the March 2006 presidential election, was arrested during the subsequent antigovernment demonstrations and sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for organizing events that disturbed public order.

2. REGIME ACTIONS & STATEMENTS

December 18, 2007

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SIMPLIFIES TRAVEL ABROAD

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on December 17 signed a presidential decree, effective January 1, 2008, abolishing a requirement for Belarusian nationals to obtain a travel-permit stamp in their passports before leaving the country, Belapan reported. Belarusians currently have to pay around $16 for a one-year travel permit. The decree also establishes regulations for the creation of a single database of people who are barred

from leaving Belarus. RFE/RL's Belarusian Service quoted Interior Minister Syarhey Martynau as saying that the database will include nearly 100,000 people who are "aware of state secrets," face criminal prosecution, have outstanding financial commitments, or fall into several other categories.

December 28, 2007

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES RULE OUT CONCESSIONS TO VENDORS

Alyaksandr Kalinouski, who is head of the commercial department of the Minsk City Executive Committee, said at a meeting with a group of owners of small businesses on December 27 that there will not be any reversal of the presidential decree restricting the activities of small businesses, Belapan reported. "Nobody is preparing documents that would introduce alterations into it [the clause that bars certain business owners from hiring employees other than three family members as of January 1, 2008]," Kalinouski said. "This is the clear position of the leadership of the country, the government, and so on," he said, adding that the government might only take some measures to facilitate the re-registering of businesses as "private unitary enterprises." Most of the business owners present at the meeting left the hall in protest. Anatol Shumchanka, leader of the Perspektyva small-business association, said the vendors' problems will grow and protests are imminent. Shumchanka announced a protest rally in Minsk on January 10, 2008, and a "March of Entrepreneurs" later in the month.

January 2, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT THREATENS TO EXPEL U.S. AMBASSADOR...

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said on December 30 that U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart will be the first person expelled from Belarus if Washington introduces new economic sanctions against Minsk, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. "She attends opposition gatherings and speaks about the possibility of economic sanctions against Belarus, fueling the situation," Lukashenka said. "Let the American ambassador mind her own problems, as she may leave her position in Belarus early," he added. In November, the U.S. Treasury Department froze all assets under U.S. jurisdiction belonging to Belarus's largest petrochemical company, Belnaftakhim, and its representatives, and forbade Americans from doing business with the company on the grounds that it is controlled by Lukashenka. Stewart said in December that the United States intends to impose economic sanctions against other Belarusian enterprises unless the authorities release political prisoners.

January13, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION REJECTS DIALOGUE WITH OPPOSITION

Anatol Lyabedzka, the leader of Belarus's United Civic Party and the co-chairman of the Political Council of United Pro-Democratic Forces, has said that the presidential administration has rejected the opposition's proposal to hold talks on the 2008 parliamentary elections, Belapan reported on January 9. The Belarusian opposition in early December proposed that the presidential administration consider joint proposals on conducting parliamentary elections in accordance with democratic standards. Natallya Pyatkevich, the administration's deputy head, replied earlier this month that the presidency does not deal with election issues. Lyabedzka described such a response as "very weird," because "a great many, if not most, bills submitted to the House of Representatives [the lower chamber of the Belarusian legislature] come from the presidential administration."

January 23, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT ACCUSES OPPOSITION OF COLLUDING WITH BUSINESSMEN

Alyaksandr Lukashenka on January 22 suggested that the opposition, under the guise of protecting businesses, is attempting to destabilize the country, Belapan reported. The previous day, small-business activists held an unsanctioned demonstration in Minsk to protest the presidential decree that, starting on January 1, restricts the activities of certain small-business owners. "We should not permit the destabilization of the country by an opposition that is hiding behind slogans about some protection of business," Lukashenka said. "Money and investors do not like marches on squares, some rumpus, but they, the opposition, seem to want destabilization. " Lukashenka said that small-business owners comprised "a 10th" of those gathered, adding that they left the demonstration "claiming that they were framed."

February 8, 2008

BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT TAKES CONTROL OF FOREIGN PRIESTS' ACTIVITIES

The Belarusian government has issued a directive on procedures for inviting foreigners to take part in religious activities in Belarus, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on February 7. The directive requires foreign priests or lecturers at theological schools to be approved by the commissioner for religious affairs, and requires a number of documents confirming the education and job seniority of the candidate. Foreign priests and lecturers must also confirm their command of Belarusian or Russian, meaning that they will be allowed to conduct church services and lectures only in those languages. The religious affairs commissioner has the right to reject the application without providing reasons. Foreign priests make up about half of Belarus's clergy.

February 8, 2008

NFORMATION MINISTER SAYS BELARUS WILL ADOPT LAW REGULATING INTERNET

Belarusian Information Minister Uladzimir Rusakevich said on February 7 that Belarus will adopt a law regulating the use of the Internet, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Rusakevich said that a special interdepartmental committee has already started studying other countries' legislation on the Internet in preparation for drafting the Belarusian law. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 2007 called for legislation to put an end to "the anarchy on the Internet." According to a report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 56 percent of Belarusians use Internet resources

February 11, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SHUFFLES PROSECUTOR-GENERAL, CONSTITUTIONAL COURT HEAD

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka issued a decree on February 8 appointing Ryhor Vasilevich to replace Pyotr Miklashevich as prosecutor-general and for Miklashevich to replace Vasilevich as chairman of the Constitutional Court, Belapan reported. Miklashevich has served as prosecutor-general since November 2004, and prior to that he was first deputy chairman of the Supreme Court. Vasilevich headed the Constitutional Court from January 1997 to January 2008, when his term expired. The appointments must be approved by the Council of the Republic, the

upper chamber of Belarus's legislature.

February 13, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT DESCRIBES ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AS BLACKMAIL...

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said on February 12 that the sanctions imposed against the state-owned Belnaftakhim petrochemical company are "nothing other than economic blackmail on the part of unscrupulous competitors that seek to prevent Belarusian companies from getting into the Latin American market," Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. In November 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department froze all assets under U.S. jurisdiction belonging to Belnaftakhim and its representatives, and barred Americans from doing business with the company, which it says is controlled by Lukashenka. Lukashenka said that for several years, threats were made to freeze bank accounts belonging to him and other Belarusian leaders. "After finding nothing, they decided to cast an economic noose on state enterprises that employ thousands of people," Lukashenka said during an extensive address to a group of students at Belarusian State University in Minsk. "Such methods cannot be justified by anything. Their discriminatory nature is evident to not only us but also other countries that support us," he added.

...AND REGARDS ISSUE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AS CLOSED

President Lukashenka on February 12 told students at Belarusian State University that he regards the issue of political prisoners in Belarus as closed. "We have closed this painful page in relations with the West, and are the first to propose movement ahead," he said, adding that "now it is the turn of the European Union to show its good intentions with regard to the Belarusian people." Lukashenka said that "the early release or release on parole of some prisoners for whom the West has special feelings" was a "goodwill gesture" and he stipulated that "their release was not connected with the forgiveness of crimes they committed, but was prompted by humane considerations only." The Belarusian authorities recently released from prison youth activists Artur Finkevich and Zmitser Dashkevich, as well as businessmen Yury Lyavonau and Mikalay Autukhovich. The United States considers three other people to be political prisoners: former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, former legislator Andrey Klimau, and journalist Alyaksandr Zdzvizhkou.

February 14, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT GIVES GO-AHEAD FOR EU OFFICE IN MINSK

President Lukashenka has issued a decree authorizing Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Varanetski to sign an agreement on the establishment of a European Commission office in Minsk, Belapan reported on February 13. The European Commission has been trying to open a Minsk office since 2005. Lukashenka on December 5 authorized Varanetski to sign the draft agreement and engage in further negotiations with the Commission. "We are taking steps to open the office for one purpose -- stepping up relations with the European Union, above all, in the spheres of mutual interest," Varanetski said, adding that Belarus is ready to sign the agreement "at any moment."

February19, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT RELEASES ANOTHER POLITICAL PRISONER...

Andrey Klimau, an opposition politician who in August 2007 was sentenced to two years in prison for insulting the president and calling for revolution in an article posted on the Internet, was unexpectedly released on February 15, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Klimau told journalists on February 16 in Minsk that he was released in pursuance of the February 11 decree issued by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Klimau said his release came to him as "complete surprise," since his hopes for freedom had been dashed by Lukashenka's recent statement that "the issue of political prisoners in Belarus is closed." Klimau, who was a legislator in the Supreme Soviet of Belarus in 1995-96, was jailed twice before: for four years of six-year sentence he received in February 1998 on charges of embezzlement and forgery, and in June 2005 for 18 months of "restricted freedom" over participation in organizing an opposition demonstration in Minsk. Along with former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin and journalist Alyaksandr Zdzvizhkou, Klimau is regarded by the West as a person persecuted for political reasons.

...SAYS HE ALSO OFFERED RELEASE TO FORMER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE...

President Lukashenka said on February 15, while visiting the Vitsebsk region where former presidential candidate Kazulin is incarcerated, that he offered Kazulin the opportunity to accompany his wife Iryna, who is suffering from cancer, to Germany for medical treatment, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported, citing government sources. "European Union ambassadors appealed to me, saying that the state of his wife had deteriorated," Lukashenka said. "OK, we all are human and anything can happen in life. I agreed for him to take his wife [to Germany] for treatment. We helped her as far as we could, offered her treatment in Germany. But, as far as I have been informed today, Kazulin refused her treatment," Lukashenka said. However, Kazulin's daughter Volha denied this. She said that if her father had really been given such an offer and she was just unaware of it, the objective was to expel him from Belarus. "Our father will never leave the country in any case," she added. Iryna Kazulina also described the circumstances of her husband's possible release as unacceptable. "The things that his [Lukashenka's] messenger told us were unacceptable. That would be a disgraceful flight from the country," she wrote in an open letter posted on the Internet. Kazulin, who ran in the March 2006 presidential election, was arrested during antigovernment demonstrations that followed the polls and sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for organizing events that disturbed public order.

February 20, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT WARNS JUDGES AGAINST POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on February 19 warned judges and prosecutors against getting involved in politics, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Lukashenka made the statement while introducing the new head of the Constitutional Court, Pyotr Miklashevich, and new Prosecutor-General Ryhor Vasilevich. Each previously held the other's position. "Some judges and prosecutors have gone into politics," Lukashenka said. "They worry about how we may be perceived by America and the European Union. But these are not your problems. These are problems of the president of the country and, partly, of the prime minister. It is we who will be sorting out these political issues." Lukashenka did not specify what particular po-

litical involvement prosecutors and judges might seek. He also failed to explain why he reappointed Vasilevich and Miklashevich to one another's posts.

March 5, 2008

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT GIVES FOREIGN INVESTORS GO-AHEAD

In a decree on March 4, Alyaksandr Lukashenka abolished legislation that was seen as scaring off foreign investors, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Lukashenka's press office said that the decision to eliminate the so-called "golden share" rule will "contribute to creating favorable conditions for drawing foreign direct investments into...the Belarusian economy." The "golden share" rule, introduced by Lukashenka in 1997 to "regulate the privatization process," allowed the authorities to intervene in the activities of joint-stock companies in which the government held a stake, and to install government-appointed managers whenever the company was thought to be facing an "unfavorable socio-economic situation." Under another decree issued in 2004, the government could apply the "golden share" rule to any enterprise formerly owned by the state, regardless of its current ownership. The decision to eliminate the legislation was welcomed by the International Monetary Fund.

March 7, 2008

BELARUS SEEKS TO HOST WORLD ICE HOCKEY CHAMPIONSHIP

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on March 6 met with Rene Fasel, the president of the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Lukashenka, who is an avid ice hockey player, presented Fasel with an award from the Belarusian National Olympic Committee, and assured him that within a few years "Belarus will make itself known as a great hockey power, taking a worthy place in the appropriate rankings." "Everything is being done in our country to turn it into a world-level hockey power," Lukashenka said. Fasel told reporters that Belarus stands a chance of winning the right to host the 2014 World Ice Hockey Championships, but the final decision will be made at a congress of the IIHF.

3. ECONOMY

December 27, 2007

BELARUS RECEIVES $1.5-BILLION LOAN FROM RUSSIA

Russia has transferred to the National Bank of Belarus a $1.5-billion loan, Belapan reported on December 27, citing a source in the Belarusian Finance Ministry. Minsk asked Russia for a $1.5-billion stabilization loan in February to ease the effects of the higher price for natural gas imported from Russia. Belarus and Russia reached an agreement on the loan on December 20. Russia pledged to give the loan in one tranche before the end of the year. The loan must be repaid in 15 years, with a five-year deferment of repayment. Earlier this month, the Belarusian government increased the state-debt limit from $2 billion to $4 billion. According to the Finance Ministry, the debt then amounted to $827.8 million.

February 12, 2008

RUSSIA TO PRESERVE FAVORABLE GAS PRICE FOR BELARUS

Russian Ambassador to Belarus Aleksandr Surikov said on February 11 in Minsk that starting on April 1 Russia will increase the price for natural gas supplied to Belarus by no more than 10 percent, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Belarus currently pays $119.5 per 1,000 cubic meters of Russian gas. Under a five-year contract signed in December 2006, Belarus and Russia are transiting toward market relations in gas supplies. The price of Russian gas is to gradually increase to the European market level by 2011, reaching 67 percent of the market level in 2008, 80 percent in 2009, 90 percent in 2010, and 100 percent in 2011.

February 21, 2008

PRESIDENT SAYS GAZPROM TO DOUBLE GAS PRICE FOR BELARUS

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has told Russian media that the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom is threatening to double its gas price for Belarus this year, Belapan reported on February 20. Lukashenka said that Belarus's economy experienced difficulty in 2007 after Gazprom raised its price and the Russian government imposed a duty on crude oil exported to Belarus. "We had to withdraw some $3 billon in real money from the economy and pay," Lukashenka said. "Natural gas became twice as expensive.... Frankly speaking, I was astonished that we managed to find a way out of that situation. But now they are threatening to double the gas price for Belarus." Lukashenka did not say who made that threat or when. Belarus currently pays $119.5 per 1,000 cubic meters of Russian gas. Russian Ambassador to Belarus Aleksandr Surikov said earlier this month that the gas price for Belarus will rise by no more than 10 percent in 2008, starting on April 1. RFE/RL's Belarus Service on February 21 quoted Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov as saying that the company does not know anything about the alleged twofold

4. REPRESSIONS

January 3, 2008

BELARUS TO DISQUALIFY CANDIDATES FOR RECEIVING FOREIGN FUNDS

Lidziya Yarmoshyna, the chairwoman of the Belarusian Central Election Commission (TsVK), said on January 2 that candidates who receive foreign financial support will be disqualified from running for parliament, Belapan reported. Yarmoshyna said that in the previous election campaign, candidates were simply warned about the use of "illegal funds," but now face having their registration annulled. The TsVK is required to prove whether foreign funds were accepted, and will therefore "conduct special polls, hear explanations, collect evidence, for example copies of printed material," Yarmoshyna said. The TsVK might also collect evidence from Belarus's national security institutions. Yarmoshyna also said that the ban on foreign support was in place during previous election campaigns, but there were no measures in place to enforce it. The TsVK has proposed that the first round of parliamentary elections be held on October 12.

January 7, 2008

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES BAN OPPOSITION LEADER FROM TRAVELING ABROAD

The Belarusian police's migration department has notified Anatol Lyabedzka, the leader of the United Civic Party, that he is listed in the Interior Ministry's database of people barred from leaving Belarus, Belapan reported on January 4. The Belarusian authorities imposed the travel ban on Lyabedzka over the defamation case brought against him in 2004. Lyabedzka allegedly slandered Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka while appearing on Russian television. Belarusian investigators in 2004 suspended the proceedings due to the lack of cooperation from Russia, but did not close the case. The government introduced the travel-ban database on January 1, replacing permit stamps in

passports.

January 14, 2008

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES JAIL PARTICIPANTS IN VENDORS' PROTEST

Minsk district courts on January 11 sentenced 23 participants in the January 10 protest against restrictions on activities of small businesses to jail sentences of largely 15 days, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. The sentenced activists are: Anatol Shumchanka, leader of the Perspektyva small-business association; Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party; small-business activist Uladzimir Shyla; and 20 youth activists who were detained by the police at the closing stage of the protest. Five of the youths were jailed with injuries they received during their arrest. Other activists called an ambulance for them as they were standing trial, but a doctor did not object to their being jailed. Tatsyana Tsishkevich, who was severely beaten during her arrest and presented her blood-stained jacket in court, received a 20-day sentence. A Minsk district court on January 12 sentenced Alyaksandr Makayeu, an advocate of entrepreneurs' rights, to 15 days in jail on charges of using foul language. The court in Barysau, Minsk Oblast, the same day reheard the case of Viktar Harbachou, who was recently cleared of charges, and fined him $350 for disorderly conduct

January 14, 2008

BELARUSIAN JUSTICE MINISTRY WANTS TO CLOSE VENDORS' ASSOCIATION

Belarus's Justice Ministry has filed a suit with the Supreme Court for the closure of the Perspektyva small-business association over its participation in the January 10 demonstration, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus service reported on January 13. The ministry accused demonstrators of violating the law on mass events and paralyzing traffic in central Minsk for more than an hour. "The actions by the organizers of the unauthorized rally, including the Perspektyva national public association, caused considerable damage to the interests of citizens, state, and public interests," the ministry said. It argued that the constitution "guarantees everyone freedom of opinion, convictions, and their full expression, as well as freedom of assembly and rallies," but "this should be done with due regard for rules set by state laws and not infringe on the rights of other people." The Justice Ministry has also ordered the United Civic Party (AHP), the Belarusian Party of Communists (PKB), and the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) to explain within three days why their leaders attended the January 10 demonstration in Minsk, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. The ministry ordered the parties to provide information "whether these persons [AHP, PKB, and BNF leaders] had been authorized by the respective parties to participate in the above-mentioned mass event" and present "appropriate decisions by the parties." The ministry warned that the parties will be ordered to "express their official stance regarding their actions at the unauthorized event" unless they provide proof that the leaders were authorized to attend the rally.

January 15, 2008

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES JAIL ANOTHER SMALL-BUSINESS ACTIVIST

A district court in Minsk on January 14 sentenced Syarhey Parsyukevich, an entrepreneur based in Vitsyebsk, to 15 days in jail for his participation in a January 10 protest against restrictions on the activities of small businesses, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Police detained Parsyukevich on January 13 in Vitsyebsk. Dozens of other businesspeople in the town who learned of Parsyukevich's detention later arrived at the police station and submitted a petition protesting against his arrest. That evening, police took Parsyukevich to Minsk, where he went on trial the following day. The Belarusian authorities have recently jailed at least 20 people for their participation in or links to the January 10 protest organized by small-business owners (see "RFE/RL Newsline," January 14, 2008). Meanwhile, the Perspektyva small-business association has issued a statement pledging to fight to the bitter end for its right to continue functioning, Belapan reported on January 14. The Justice Ministry recently filed a suit with the Supreme Court seeking the closure of Perspektyva because of its leader Anatol Shumchanka's participation in an unsanctioned protest. "If the state has turned its back on the people and no longer needs entrepreneurs and their taxes, the authorities will surely make every effort to close down the organization, whose leader seeks to defend the economic and constitutional rights of small-business representatives at the price of his freedom," the statement read. Volha Krumina, the deputy head of Perspektyva, told Belapan that in the event of the organization's closure, its members will attempt to set up a political party or join an opposition political group.

January 28, 2008

AUTHORITIES DRAFT EXPELLED STUDENT INTO ARMY

Dzmitry Zhaleznichenka, who was recently expelled for the second time from Homel State University, was hastily drafted into the army on January 25, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Zhaleznichenka, a third-year student and a member of opposition Belarusian Popular Front, was expelled for alleged violation of internal university rules. Zhaleznichenka claims he was drafted while still a student and that the expulsion order was presented to him only at the enlistment office. Zhaleznichenka announced an indefinite hunger strike unless his draft order is revoked or he is transferred to a unit where orders are given in the Belarusian language.



Dzmitry Zhaleznichenka

February 4, 2008

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES BAN YOUNG OPPOSITIONISTS FROM TRAVELING ABROAD

Zmitser Dashkevich, leader of the unregistered organization Youth Front, was prevented on February 2 from traveling to Lithuania, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. The authorities recently released Dashkevich from a correctional facility before the end of the 18-month term he was serving for heading an unregistered organization. Dashkevich was traveling to Vilnius, where he intended to resume studying at the Vilnius Teachers' Training University. Belarusian border guards ordered Dashkevich to get off the bus, claiming that he is listed in a da-

tabase of people prohibited from leaving Belarus. Officers told Dashkevich that he should ask the Minsk district court, which convinced him, for an explanation as to how long he will be on the list.

February 18, 2008
BELARUSIAN COURT CONFIRMS OPPOSITION MEMBER'S INDUCTION

A Homel district court on February 14 told the mother of Zmitser Zhaleznichenka, a member of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front who was hastily drafted into the army after being expelled from university, that it has reversed its previous ruling to suspend Zhaleznichenka's military service, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. The court said that it reversed the ruling due to the discovery of new circumstances, but did not provide further details. Zhaleznichenka, who had an excellent academic record at Homel State University, has been expelled from the university twice over violations of the university's internal regulations. The first time, Zhaleznichenka appealed against his expulsion and won. After the second expulsion, he was hastily drafted into the army. Zhaleznichenka's mother appealed against the decision of the recruitment board and the court initially suspended Zhaleznichenka's military service, but the military unit where Zhaleznichenka is deployed has not implemented the court's decision.

March 10, 2008
BELARUSIAN ACTIVIST TO REMAIN IN JAIL, OTHER ACTIVISTS QUESTIONED

A district prosecutor's office in Minsk on March 7 ruled that small-business activist Syarhey Parsyukevich should remain in a pretrial detention center, Belapan reported. Parsyukevich was recently jailed for three days pending a decision on criminal charges against him. He is accused of attacking a police officer while serving a 15-day prison term for his participation in a January 10 demonstration in Minsk. Parsyukevich claims that he did not attack anyone, but that a prison warden attacked him. On March 9, Belarusian police detained 32 members of the Youth Front organization who gathered for a meeting at the Minsk office of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. Police officers entered the office under the pretext that litter was tossed from the office's window, and ordered participants to come to the police station. After identity checks at the police station, the activists were released. Police took similar action in mid-February, detaining at least 30 Youth Front members when they gathered at a private home for a meeting of the organization's council. The Youth Front has unsuccessfully applied for registration with the Belarusian Justice Ministry five times, and is therefore considered an unregistered organization by the government. The group was recently registered in the Czech Republic.

5. BELARUS & the WORLD

December 20, 2007
UN URGES BELARUS TO RELEASE POLITICAL PRISONERS

The UN General Assembly on December 18 voted 72 to 33, with 78 abstentions, to adopt a U.S.-initiated resolution criticizing the deteriorating human-rights situation in Belarus and urging the government immediately to release all political prisoners, Belapan reported. The resolution affirms that "the situation of human rights in Belarus in 2007 continued to significantly deteriorate." The document cites the "severely flawed" presidential election in March 2006 "due to arbitrary use of state power" and the government's failure to ensure that local elections in January 2007 met international standards. The resolution expresses "deep concern" over the government's continued use of the criminal justice system to silence political opponents and human rights defenders and over reports of harassment and closure of nongovernmental organizations, national minority and religious groups, opposition political parties, independent media outlets, trade unions, and student organizations. The document calls on Belarusian authorities "to release immediately and unconditionally all individuals detained for politically motivated reasons and other individuals detained for exercising or promoting human rights."

January 4, 2008
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BELARUS RESPONDS TO EXPULSION THREAT

U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart has responded to the December 30 statement of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka threatening to expel her from the country if Washington introduces new sanctions against Minsk, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on January 3. Stewart said that the United States has repeatedly explained to Belarusian authorities that the measures were imposed against Belarusian officials and others responsible for human rights abuses, the crackdown on democracy, and corruption. Stewart said that the United States is also "prepared to take appropriate action against entities owned or controlled by such persons." Stewart stressed that her December 13 statement on possible new sanctions was in line with U.S. policy. "The key to improved U.S.-Belarus relations remains in Belarusian hands — the release of all political prisoners and its respect for basic democratic norms, including free elections and freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association," she said.

January 29, 2008
PRESIDENT SAYS U.S. SUPPORTS FREEDOM IN BELARUS

In his final State of the Union address on January 28, U.S. President George W. Bush said that the United States supports freedom in Belarus, international media reported. "We support freedom in countries from Cuba and Zimbabwe to Belarus and Burma," he said in his annual address to both houses of the U.S. Congress. Bush also said that his administration changed the way it delivers foreign aid by launching the Millennium Challenge Account program. "This program strengthens democracy, transparency, and the rule of law in developing nations, and I ask you to fully fund this important initiative," he said.

February 2, 2008
SWEDEN ENDS COOPERATION WITH BELARUSIAN UNIVERSITY OVER STUDENT'S EXPULSION

The Swedish partners of the Belarusian State University have announced that they are breaking their connections with the university's faculty of journalism over the recent expulsion of Franak Vyachorka, an activist of the youth wing of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on February 18. Sweden has provided the Belarusian State University with 49 million kronas ($7.7 million) in mutual training programs to date. The university authorities expelled Vyachorka, a third-year student of the journalism faculty, for failing to pass two exams. Vyachorka argued that he took his exams as soon as possible after serving a jail term. He was sentenced to jail for supporting an associate while she stood trial for participating in an unauthorized demonstration of small-business owners. The university authorities have not recognized the jail sentence as a sufficient excuse for missing exams.

European Parliament Resolution

The European Parliament at its plenary session by unanimous vote adopted a resolution on the situation Belarus. The Belarusian authorities are urged to release political prisoners, grant freedom of speech and hold free election. The document expresses solidarity with the united democratic opposition of Belarus and "all Belarusian citizens who strive for an independent, open and democratic Belarus based on the rule of law".

The document welcomes the recent release of several democratic opposition activists, and "the recent developments on the agreements to establish the European Commission's Delegation in Minsk as a positive step towards renewing dialogue with the European Union."

The European Parliament deeply regrets that the situation of democracy, human rights and the rule of law is not improving in Belarus.

The document recalls that in November 2006 the European Union declared its readiness to renew its relationship with Belarus and its people within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as soon as the Belarusian government demonstrates respect for democratic values and for the basic rights of the Belarusian people. The motion for a resolution states that "in order to engage in any substantial dialogue with the EU, Belarus needs to implement the remaining conditions laid down in the 'non-paper' "What the EU could bring to Belarus."

The document also "condemns the recent arrests of these activists, who were detained for 15 days in prison and faced expulsion from university, following peaceful demonstrations on 16 January 2008 in Minsk to mark the day of solidarity with imprisoned Belarusian opposition activists and the families of missing prominent Belarusians. Besides, the European deputies condemn the fact that Belarus is the last country in Europe which still practises the death penalty, which is counter to European values."

The European Parliament urges the Belarus authorities "to immediately and unconditionally release the remaining political prisoner, Alyaksandr Kazulin, and stop using intimidation, harassment, targeted arrests and politically motivated prosecution against the activists of the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus."

The document urges the authorities of Belarus to implement OSCE standards in the organisation of the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 28 September 2008; calls on the government to give democratic opposition representatives access to district election commissions, to grant registration to all parliamentary candidates and their observers.

The European Parliament urges on the Commission and Council to consider the possibilities of waiving the cost of visas for Belarusian citizens entering the Schengen territory, which is the only way to prevent Belarus and its citizens from becoming increasingly isolated.

In the document the European Parliament has also called on the Commission and Council and the international community as a whole "to extend more support to the civil society of Belarus and, in particular, to increase financial aid to the independent media, to non-governmental organisations and to Belarusian students studying abroad."

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, February 24, 2008

Culture & Society

Poetry on Tiptoes

By Ales Kudrytski

Andrey Khadanovich attracts hundreds of people with his poems and believes that Lukashenka has saved Belarusian literature.

If you want to come to the poetry reading by Andrey Khadanovich, it's not a very good idea to arrive on time. Try to be there half an hour in advance, otherwise you may find yourself packed into the aisle between other fans, who try to get a glimpse of the figure reading poems from the stage, standing on their tiptoes. On February 7, 2008 the main concert hall of the Belarusian Academy of Arts in Minsk was crammed with about five hundred people.

A couple of dozen more waited in the hallway, unable to get inside. All of them wanted to be there when the new book of poems *Berlibry* was presented. Who is Andrey Khadanovich, the poet, who attracts such enormous audiences in Minsk and elsewhere in Belarus?

Often called the most vivid discovery of Belarusian modern poetic scene, Khadanovich was born in 1973. He teaches French literature at the Belarusian State University, as well as in the Belarusian Lyceum, the school that was closed down by the authorities several years ago.

Khadanovich's poetry is clearly post-modernistic. He rhymes his lines in perfect manner, creating some kind of DJ-mix out of his own thoughts and well-known quotations from the classic Belarusian and Soviet poetry or lyrics of Western rock hits. He skillfully weaves the web of elaborate word games, which will inevitably catch your attention. Unexpected combinations of familiar sayings create numerous new meanings.

This, however, makes it extremely difficult (if not to say — impossible) to translate his poems into other languages. "If you want to define poetry, then this is what goes lost in translation," Khadanovich likes to say. Nevertheless he is fond of translation himself, and even teaches a translation workshop in the Belarusian Colegium (semi-underground independent education community in Minsk). On February 7, Khadanovich has presented a book of his *vers libre*. He has finally turned to this new genre, not bound by the rhymed form, which gives us hope that some day we may have a decent translation of his works into English.

Khadanovich is a one-man orchestra. If you want to save the most boring literature presentation from failure, invite Khadanovich as a guest. He reads poems, sings songs and plays his guitar, and chats with the audience in between. Andrey even raps his poem "Christmas Rap" together with listeners, who eagerly clap their hands in tact. Khadanovich also has a creative partnership with Belarusian rock-band "Indiga" and Belarusian chansonnier Zmitsier Vajtsiushkevich, supplying them with lyrics. He

is the first Belarusian poet to have issued his own audio CD. It is titled *Abmennik* (Currency Exchange Office), and features jazz-poetic improvisations with Belarusian musician Siarhey Pukst.

Surprisingly, the very first book by Khadanovich (*Letters from under the Blanket*) was published in Kyiv– in Ukrainian. His another book *From Belarus with love* was a bold experiment — printed in Ukraine in Belarusian (!) language, it was actually sold in Ukrainian book shops. Books printed in Belarus followed, but they are not always easy to find in the country.

Khadanovich is one of those writers, whose books are allowed to be printed by private publishers, but are often prevented from being disseminated in Belarus. These authors are allowed to write, but discouraged to meet with their readers. In fact, the reading by Khadanovich on February 7 should have originally taken place in the House of Writers in Minsk, but Belarusian authorities prohibited it. Khadanovich was able to find another room in the Belarusian Academy of Arts only with the backing of the Goethe Institut, which, among other cultural activities, also promotes his work.



Andrey KHADANOVICH

However, such a grave situation has its advantages. Khadanovich believes that, in fact, these are rather favourable conditions for a writer. At times, when there is little truth to be found elsewhere, people tend to look for it in literature. "Perhaps, that is why poetry readings in Belarus attract much larger audiences than in more stable Western democracies", Khadanovich said in his interview to the radio station Deutsche Welle.

"Coming to events such as a literature reading or artistic performance becomes some kind of protest", says Khadanovich. "People use it to demonstrate their critical position, to interact with the like-minded." The authoritarian regime has created a new "union of writer,",whose members have a monopoly of visiting schools and universities as guest lecturers. Independent literature is banned from the state-owned literature magazines. Non-state cultural periodicals like *ARCHE* or *Dzeyaslou* find it very difficult to exist in Belarus. They are thrown out of kiosks, you often have no chance to subscribe to them, and it is mostly the untamed energy of their editors, which helps to keep these magazines coming to people.

In fact, Khadanovich is confident, that in some way Lukashenka has saved Belarusian literature. "He created such harsh conditions for its existence, that only writers who are most talented, energetic and genuinely interested in Belarusian literature remained faithful to it."

When opposition protests flared up in Minsk in March 2006, the wife of Khadanovich burst into tears after the conversation with her father, who believed every single word of lies broadcast on the state-owned television. "I realized that I simply couldn't stand such situation and went to October square", says Khadanovich. He doesn't consider himself to be a hero or a revolutionary, but he was indeed one of active participants of the protests. One could often see him in the tent camp, talking to people, reciting poems or even organizing an improvised poetic workshop. Quite a daring thing to do for a professor who teaches at a state university!

Source: http://www.democraticbelarus.eu (Office for Democratic Belarus Office, Brussels), Febr. 17, 2008

Valzhyna Mort — Factory of Tears

Copper Canyon, Apr. 2008. translated. from Belarusian by Elizabeth Wright & Franz Wright.
ISBN 978-1-55659-274-4. pap. $15

Celebrated in Europe for her dynamic performances, Mort, a 26-year-old Belarusian poet, is a fireball, and her American debut collection, nothing short of phenomenal.

This bilingual publication, cotranslated by the husband-and-wife team of Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Franz Wright, features 36 works,



Valzhyna MORT

including the blistering prose piece *White Trash*, *Polish Immigrants*, and *Belarusian II* Mort's vision is visceral, wistful, bittersweet, and dark. In *Music of Locusts*, the narrator laments, "Everything belongs to me but hope" while "the whole colorful universe/ appears like the deep/ hole in the sink" in *Hospital* Mort takes an unflinching look at a violent world, referencing homeless dogs, dead men, terrorist attacks in Chechnya, stinging memories, bloody bodies, and forced silence. Personal, political, and passionate, Mort's poetry will surely sustain many reading audiences. Highly recommended for public and academic libraries.- Miriam Tuliao, NYPL

Editor's note: The Spring issue of *Poets and Writers* features her picture on the cover, together with an extensive interview.

MEDIA WATCH

PRESS REVIEW

Belarusan 'Goodwill'

Excerpts from an article in *The World Street Journal*, March 7, 2008

By Luke Allnutt

Something strange is happening in Belarus. In recent weeks, most of the country's political prisoners have been released in what authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko has described as a "goodwill gesture." He also recently gave the European Commission the go-ahead to set up a branch in Minsk. This is an unprecedented opportunity for the West — and in particular the European Union — to engage Belarus.

Make no mistake: There is no real "goodwill" here. Rather, President Lukashenko is well aware that the West won't open relations with Belarus unless he releases the dissidents -- the politicians, journalists and youth activists who dared to disagree with his cuckoo economic policies and heavy-handed police tactics. And Mr. Lukashenko is now in desperate need of new friends.

The president's popularity depends on economic stability. With the help of heavily subsidized Russian gas, Belarus managed to avoid economic shock therapy throughout the 1990s. Look east to Russia, the president used to say, and see how your former comrades are suffering as a result of economic reforms. Take comfort in your run-down collective farms and cheap bread.

But ever since Russia doubled the amount Belarus has to pay for natural gas in 2007 to $100 per 1,000 cubic meters from $46 per 1,000 cubic meters, Mr. Lukashenko's position has become far more precarious. Although Russia is still a benefactor — in December, Moscow approved a $1.5 billion loan for Belarus — it is a more prudent and less benevolent one. Mr. Lukashenko complained recently that Russia's state-controlled gas monopoly, Gazprom, had threatened to double once again the price Belarus pays for natural gas.

So Mr. Lukashenko's change of heart is certainly tactical. But that change could still become permanent if the West prods him along while keeping in mind his record of erratic overtures and attempts to play Russia and the West off one another.

Western institutions should insist that their demands be met. For starters, that means releasing Alexander Kozulin, who after running for president in 2006 was sentenced to five and a half years in prison for staging antigovernment protests. (After going on hunger strike, and amid stout pressure from the West, Mr. Kozulin was released for three days to attend his wife's Feb. 27 funeral.) Mr. Lukashenko must also vow to put an end to the repression of dissenters, release all political prisoners, stop clamping down on media and NGOs, and hold free and fair elections.

But there is also a strong moral imperative for engaging, rather than isolating, Mr. Lukashenko. More than ever, Russia is setting the tone in the former Soviet Union, and its message is unhelpful to the people of the region. Whereas the West, trumpeting the virtues of civil society, democracy and the rule of law, once was seen as a beacon, now Russia, with its message of criminal capitalism, misuse of state resources and gross rights violations, is increasingly becoming a working model for many of its neighbors. Moscow has no interest in a more open Belarus. And beyond empty pan-Slavic rhetoric or the occasional dalliance with the idea of a Russia-Belarus union, the Kremlin likewise has no regard for the welfare of the Belarusan people.

If the Lukashenko regime is serious about opening up to the West and attracting foreign investment, political reforms will be unavoidable. Without secure property rights, a well-functioning judiciary and an end to corruption, foreign money is unlikely to pour into Belarus. And President Lukashenko seems to realize this. In another step in the right direction, he rescinded Tuesday the "golden share" rule with which the state could control private companies. Western engagement can ensure that more such steps will follow.

Source: http://democraticbelarus.eu.
Office for Democratic Belarus, Brussels

Heart of darkness

A ray of hope from Belarusian exiles

By Edward Lucas

LIKE a stub of candle, even a small bit of history is a comfort when you are in a dark room. Belarus looks pretty gloomy under Alyaksandr Lukashenka. An earthy collective-farm manager, he won the last freely contested election in 1994 against a representative of the old Soviet nomenklatura.

Many people (including your columnist) thought that any change was bound to be for the better. It wasn't. The new regime pioneered the kind of authoritarian rule, bombastic and occasionally murderous, that has now spread to Russia. In retrospect, 1990-94 looks like the heyday of Belarussian freedom.

With one exception. For a few months in 1918, Belarus enjoyed its first fragile taste of independence. As the Soviet regime consolidated its hold, the government fled, first to Lithuania, then to Prague.

The 90th anniversary of that first proclamation of statehood is on March 25th. It will be celebrated by both the opposition in Belarus and by the Belarusian National Rada (BNR) , an émigré assembly and government-in-exile that has doggedly maintained a vestigial existence for the past nine decades.

The idea of maintaining loyalty to a country that even nonagenarians would not remember might seem impossibly quixotic. But experience suggests that when governments-in-exile keep going, history rewards them.

The BNR now presents a poignant symbolic challenge to the regime at home, and is a focus of unity for the opposition.

Slowly, real-world politicians are beginning to take it more seriously. The BNR's president, a personable Canadian artist named Ivonka Survilla, is in Strasbourg this week to be formally received at the European Parliament, along with a bevy of Belarusians from both the diaspora and the domestic opposition.

From Economist.com, March 13, 2008 (excerpts)

BOOK REVIEW

BELARUS: Europe's Next Flashpoint? Policy Memorandum. Stephen J. Thorn. Funding for the project was provided in part by the Smith Richardson Foundation. December 2007. 76 p.

Contents: 1. Why Is Belarus Important? 2. History, Identity in Dispute. 3. Independence, 1991-1994. 4. Union? 5. Who Is Alexander Lukashenko? 6. The Economy. 7. Constructing a Dictatorship. 8. European Relations: Thirteen Years of Failure. 9. U.S.-Belarus Relations: Unanswered Challenges. 10. Recommendations. Endnotes.

Staliūnas, Darius. Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863. Reviewed in: Russian Review, Volume 67, Issue 2, April 2008.

Zel'tser, Arkadii. Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki 1917-1941 (The Jews of the Soviet Province: Vitebsk and the Shtetls, 1917-1941). Reviewed in: Russian Review, Volume 67, Issue 2, April 2008.

Hervouet, Ronan. Datcha blues: existences ordinaires et dictature en Biélorussie. Montreuil, Aux lieux d'être (Mondes contemporains), 2007. 193 p., ill. in color. ISBN 978-2-916063-49-2

Edward Lucas: The New Cold War (Bloomsbury, 2008, 343 p., ISBN 978 0 7475 9567 0)

Russia's vengeful, xenophobic, and ruthless rulers have turned the sick man of Europe into a menacing bully. The rise to power of Vladimir Putin and his ex-KGB colleagues coincided with a tenfold rise in world oil prices.

Though its incompetent authoritarian rule is a tragic missed opportunity for the Russian people, Kremlin, Inc. has paid off the state's crippling debts and is restoring its clout at home and abroad. Inside Russia it has crushed every constraint, muzzling the media, brushing aside political opposition, castrating the courts and closing down critical pressure groups.

LETTERS

Dear *Belarusian Review*:

Enclosed is an international postal money order in US funds for my 2008 subscription renewal to the *Belarusian Review*. I've included an additional $10 for international delivery. If this is not required, please retain this amount as a gift from me.

The ***Belarusian Review*** is an important publication that informs the world of the current events taking place in Belarus. As the Belarusian people around the world celebrate and commemorate the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the B.N.R. in 1918, I truly hope that this will serve as catalyst that will transform Belarus into a truly democratic European country, wiping away the sad and destructive role of Lukashenka's dictatorship.

Sincerely,

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